

THE APOCALYPTIC LANDSCAPES OF LUDWIG MEIDNER

by

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## ABSTRACT

The thesis examines the apocalyptic landscape paintings of Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966), executed in Berlin between the years of 1911 and 1916. Meidner was an early adherent of the early generation of Expressionism. His creative project is, therefore, explored within the broader paradigm of German Expressionism. The apocalyptic landscapes are examined through a discussion of three themes: ideas of decline in German culture and Expressionist messianism, the experience of modernity and Meidner's cityscape, and the apocalypse and revolution.

Meidner and his contemporary Expressionist artists were influenced by a discourse which argued that German culture was in a state of decline and that artists were responsible for inciting its renewal. They were also a driving force of this discourse, interpreting its significance to be the messianic role of artists in the development of culture. Meidner was unique among his artistic contemporaries for claiming that cities were the 'new homeland' of German citizens. He saw the modern metropolis as the crucial site for initiating real cultural change. His representation of the city during an apocalypse demonstrates Expressionist ideas about creation through destruction. The thesis argues that Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes are positive expressions of ideas relating to radical revolution.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis examines how the apocalyptic landscape paintings of Ludwig Meidner (1884-1966) reflect German Expressionist ideas about art and German culture at the start of the twentieth century. Meidner's apocalyptic imagery was conceived and created between the years of 1911 and 1916. During this time he produced a collection of oil paintings that represented the apocalyptic destruction of Germany's burgeoning Berlin metropolis. Although an emphasis on urban life would come to dominate the output of late Expressionism, Meidner's use of Berlin as subject matter was far less common among his immediate contemporaries. Alongside many German artists and intellectuals around the turn of the twentieth century, the early generation of Expressionists were deeply ambivalent about the rapid development of modernity in Germany's cities. Much of the Expressionist landscape painting from this period positively ignored the city in favour of more rural environments. Certainly, Meidner was unique in referring to the city as the 'real homeland' of German citizens.<sup>1</sup> Meidner's city apocalypses have been interpreted as an expression of anxiety towards the city and a general mood of cultural pessimism in Germany. It has also been claimed that his representations of a modern-day apocalypse were somehow anticipating the devastating effects of World War One. This thesis explores an alternative reading of Meidner's apocalyptic imagery. Although the early generation of Expressionist artists were indeed responding to a widespread cultural pessimism, they were equally engaged with ideas that put artistic figures at the centre of cultural renewal and the dawn of a new age.

Expressionist ideology in the early-twentieth century professed that art could act as a vehicle

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<sup>1</sup> Ludwig Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', (first published in *Kunst und Künstler*, 1914), in Rose-Carol Washton Long (ed.), *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism*, California, 1995, p.102



for real cultural and social change. Meidner and his contemporaries expected that their art would lead people towards new ideas and transform the existing political, social and cultural landscape. To understand Meidner's apocalyptic landscape paintings solely as a reflection of cultural pessimism or anxious anticipation is to overlook the complex of concerns and solutions which occupied Expressionist artists' ideas about art and culture. This thesis examines how Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes reflect Expressionist ideas about artistic leadership, cultural renewal, revolution and the dawn of a new age.

Meidner was not attached to any of the major German Expressionist groups of his time, such as *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) or *Die Brücke* (The Bridge), and is classified as one of the significant 'individualist' or 'independent' Expressionist artists from the early-twentieth century.<sup>2</sup> He was well educated in art history and read a great deal around his subject. Although his parents had wanted him to do something practical and apprenticed him in 1901 to a bricklayer, he practiced art in his own time and succeeded in entering the Royal School of Art in Breslau in 1903.<sup>3</sup> His education was continued when a wealthy aunt funded a year long trip to Paris in 1906, where Meidner attended the 'Julian' and 'Cormon' academies. By the time he settled in Berlin in 1907 he had an art education to match his Expressionist contemporaries and became critically engaged in their artistic circles as both a painter and a writer. He contributed essays to Berlin's contemporary art periodicals, such as *Kunst und Künstler* (Art and Artists) and *Der Sturm* (The Storm). Meidner's most famous essay 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis' (1914), for example, was written for an issue of *Kunst and Künstler*; a periodical devoted to statements from contemporary artists about their artistic

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<sup>2</sup> See Peter Lasko, 'The Individualists', in *The Expressionist Roots of Modernism*, Manchester, 2003, pp 131-145; Victor H. Miesel (ed.), 'Independent Expressionists', in *The Voices of German Expressionism*, (first published, 1970), London, 2003, pp 89-111

<sup>3</sup> Carol Eliel (with a contribution by Eberhard Roters), *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, Exhibition Catalogue, Los Angeles County Museum of Art, Los Angeles, 1989, p.11

goals.<sup>4</sup> Reproductions of Meidner's prints and drawings regularly appeared in Berlin's literary Expressionist magazines, such as *Die Aktion* (The Action) and *Weissen Blätter* (White Sheets). He founded his own exhibiting group called *Die Pathetiker* (The Pathetic Ones) who exhibited together in 1912 at the Galerie Der Sturm (The Storm Gallery). He was also associated with a group of revolutionary Expressionist artists in 1918 called the *Novembergruppe* (The November Group). Although Meidner worked independently of any programme of principles formulated by a major Expressionist group, he was critically engaged and actively involved in the Expressionist paradigm. His commitment to smaller Expressionist groups and involvement with certain Expressionist circles will be used to explore his particular artistic goals and principles within the broader scope of German Expressionism.

German Expressionism was an art which intended to instruct the public on social and political issues. Expressionist artists were committed to communicating with a wide public through a variety of platforms. They founded over 250 journals and periodicals, strove to exhibit their work regularly and created a strong network of communication through a variety of gatherings, public performances and cabarets. Opposed to the aestheticist principle of 'art for art's sake' that was still prevalent in France at the time, German Expressionists regarded their art as socially, nationally and culturally engaged. There was, however, no concrete programme to define the character of this engagement. Expressionism dealt with a range of contradictory themes and motivations from primitivism and modernity, to nationalism and spiritualism. Thus, the term 'German Expressionism' refers to a large range of artistic activities from 1905 to the early 1920s in film, theatre, architecture, art and literature from a

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<sup>4</sup> Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', (first published in *Kunst und Künstler*, 1914), in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, pp 101-104

variety of German-speaking cities, regions and countries. Since the 1960s, art historical scholarship has acknowledged the term as remarkably ill-defined despite a popular belief that some elusive quality does unify Expressionism.<sup>5</sup> Scholars continue to examine and re-examine themes which they argue are the essence of Expressionist coherence. Frederik S. Levine's extended study from 1979, for example, argues that its driving energy is defined by an overwhelming propensity towards the theme of regression and the theme of apocalypse.<sup>6</sup> Donald E. Gordon has argued alternatively in *Expressionism: Art and Idea* that if German Expressionism is to be understood as a coherent movement at all, then it must be seen as inhabiting an intellectual milieu of ambivalence towards modernity.<sup>7</sup> These are just two examples among many and after decades of scholarship the boundaries of 'Expressionism' shift constantly and continue to invite reassessment. My analysis of Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes will seek to contribute to the wider debate about how we approach Expressionism. It will, however, be mindful of the complex history of 'Expressionism' as a term and focus only on those ideas which can be directly associated with the artist himself and not this ill-defined group as a whole.

In contrast to other important artists from the early generation of Expressionism, such as Emil Nolde, Wassily Kandinsky, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Franz Marc, and Max Beckmann, Meidner has been the subject of few extended and focussed studies. This is despite the general recognition of the significance of his work: Peter Lasko, for example, has argued that Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes from 1912 and 1913 assured him the reputation of being the

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<sup>5</sup> Shulamith Behr, David Fanning, Douglas Jarman (eds), 'Introduction', in *Expressionism Reassessed*, Manchester, 1993, pp 1-11

<sup>6</sup> Frederick S. Levine, *The Apocalyptic Vision: the Art of Franz Marc as German Expressionism*, New York, 1979, p.3

<sup>7</sup> Donald E. Gordon, 'Introduction' in *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, New Haven, 1987, xv-xvii; See also, Gordon, 'Expressionism: Art by Antithesis,' *Art in America* 69 (March 1981), pp 98-111

most 'expressionist' of the Expressionists.<sup>8</sup> The only extended study on Meidner in English is the catalogue of the first and last comprehensive exhibition of his apocalyptic landscapes, held at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art in 1989.<sup>9</sup> Meidner is otherwise discussed only within the context of more general studies on German Expressionism or German culture in the period leading up to the First World War. His apocalyptic landscapes are often recruited by scholars who are looking at German art that anticipated the war. In Alan Kramer's book *Dynamic of Destruction*, for example, Kramer used Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes as an example of German avant-garde culture which did not positively anticipate war but anticipated it with 'dread and horror.'<sup>10</sup> Eliel and Roters also suggest that Meidner anticipated the devastating effects of World War One and made this a key theme in the interpretation of the exhibition. To understand Meidner as a victim of an intense feeling of foreboding in the years leading up to the First World War is an example of how scholars make predictions about the past and read history backwards. Meidner conceived of his apocalyptic imagery some three years before the war began, making any anticipation of the realities of World War One a uniquely clairvoyant act. A second key theme in the interpretation of the exhibition was that Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes were expressions of the artist's anxious, desolate and despairing mental state. Of all Expressionist artists, Meidner is the most consistently referred to as 'anxious' or 'pessimistic'. In *The Voices of German Expressionism* Victor H. Miesel describes Meidner as 'one of the most anxiety-ridden and highly-strung of all the Expressionists.'<sup>11</sup> The expression of subjective emotion was a fundamental part of the Expressionists' creative project. It did not, however, define it the way it has come to define

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<sup>8</sup> Lasko, *The Expressionist Roots of Modernism*, p.137

<sup>9</sup> Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*

<sup>10</sup> Alan Kramer, 'Culture and War', in *Dynamic of Destruction: Culture and Mass Killing in the First World War*, Oxford, 2007, p.174

<sup>11</sup> Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p.100

Meidner's work. There are those scholars who have positioned Meidner's work within the context of a broader cultural pessimism rather than a private inner turmoil. Jay Winter, for example, has argued that Meidner captured a common place pessimism deeply imprinted on nineteenth-century cultural life.<sup>12</sup> Jill Lloyd has been more precise about the particular character of Meidner's cultural pessimism. She has argued that his apocalyptic landscapes reflect a deep ambivalence among Expressionist artists towards the development of modernity in Berlin, stating that in Meidner's apocalypses 'man and the landscape are the tragic victims of the battle between nature and technology'.<sup>13</sup>

The existing scholarship on Meidner raises important issues about the production of his apocalyptic landscapes, such as Expressionist subjectivism, widespread cultural pessimism and ambivalence towards modernity. There is, however, a significant gap in the existing scholarship. Meidner was not merely the angst-ridden figure art history has characterised him to be. He was a well-educated, highly critical and successful exhibiting artist in a competitive art world. He was also the founder of his own artistic group, the host of both artistic and literary meetings and was determinedly revolutionary in his artistic commitments. Furthermore, he was a rare example of an Expressionist artist from the early generation who truly embraced the reality of metropolitan dominance in German culture by claiming it to be the 'real homeland' of German citizens. Meidner was no exception to Expressionism's belief in the strength and superior quality of the artist. He was acutely critical of the present and the way his contemporaries were approaching what were believed to be its degenerate conditions. He held his own radical beliefs about how to proceed with a didactic art form that could revolutionise German culture and lead people towards the dawn of a new

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<sup>12</sup> See Jay Winter, 'The apocalyptic imagination in art: from anticipation to allegory', in *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History*, Cambridge, 1996, pp 145-178

<sup>13</sup> Jill Lloyd, 'The Lure of the Metropolis', in *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity*, New Haven and London, 1991, p.158

age. These radical beliefs remain unexplored, however, and Meidner continues to be characterised as an angst-ridden victim of the development of Germany's modernisation. This thesis endeavours to provide an alternative interpretation by reconciling his apparently dystopian imagery with the artistic culture of Expressionism which understood the role of artists as cultural leaders.

This thesis is divided into three chapters: 'The Decline of German Culture and Expressionist Messianism', 'The Experience of Modernity and Meidner's Cityscape' and 'The Apocalypse and Revolution'. Chapter one examines the belief popular among Meidner and his contemporaries that German culture was in a state of decline and that artists were responsible for inciting its renewal. The Expressionists' creative project was deeply involved in a dialogue that posited artists as elevated above the rest of society and responsible for leading the public towards the dawn of a new age. In this regard the philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche had a particularly important and well-documented influence on Meidner and his contemporaries. Nietzsche's ideas about artistic messianism are introduced in this chapter to draw conclusions about how Expressionist artists understood their restorative role as artists. Chapter two examines the meaning behind Meidner's use of the Berlin cityscape in his apocalyptic paintings. During the time he was working it was popular to conceive of the city and the country as offering polarised experiences. While the rural landscape represented traditional values of kinship and community, the city represented the experience and development of modernity. I argue that Meidner used the industrial cityscape of Berlin to communicate his passionate belief in the merits of embracing the reality of the present. He believed that cities had become the 'real homeland' of German citizens, the dominating force in German culture and that they should, therefore, be approached as the locus for cultural transformation. Chapter three explores how the apocalypse has come to traditionally

symbolise a grave but restorative interruption of history which will see the dawn of a new age. Through an analysis of the biblical apocalypse, Nietzsche's understanding of an earthly apocalypse, the apocalyptic imaginings of Expressionist artists and Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes, I show how notions of apocalypse were not fully distinguished from the idea of revolution. Destruction was seen as a revolutionary cultural policy and the sign of the coming of a new age; it was welcomed by many German artists and intellectuals during the early years of the twentieth century as the route to creating a better future. I argue in this chapter that Meidner's apocalyptic destruction of the city in his landscape painting is, therefore, not as dystopian as scholars in the past have characterised it to be, but rather, a positive expression of his support for radical revolution.

Expressionism was an art without a centre which addressed a broad spectrum of political, social, cultural and spiritual issues. The peripheral and independent Expressionist artists like Meidner therefore help us to understand the scope of Expressionism's divided and somewhat ambiguous history. My analysis of Meidner thus aims to act as a vehicle by which broader judgements about the boundaries and motivations of Expressionism can be made, for his representations of the city and apocalypse reveal important issues in the unresolved nature of Expressionist ideas about the future.

## CHAPTER ONE

### IDEAS OF DECLINE IN GERMAN CULTURE AND EXPRESSIONIST MESSIANISM

Following the considerable rise of nationalism across Europe in the late-nineteenth century and the political unification of Germany in 1871, many German intellectuals became preoccupied with ideas about the quality of German culture. Once examined, it became a popular view that German culture was in a state of decline and that its renewal was to come exclusively from the artistic and intellectual realm. This chapter examines the presence of these ideas within the general ethos of the early generation of German Expressionism.

Distinct from other European art movements at the time, German Expressionist artists focussed on the social and political in their art. They were opposed, for example, to the notion of 'l'art pour l'art' (art for art's sake), which was popular in France, at least up until 1905.

Meidner regarded this idea that the value of art was independent of any social function as 'the pompous speeches of sterile Frenchmen.'<sup>14</sup> I discuss the general structure of ideas about cultural decline and the leading role of art in its renewal through the example of three influential figures: Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Nordau and Julius Langbehn. This discussion demonstrates how many intellectuals understood 'culture' as something defined solely by artistic and intellectual activity. The early generation of Expressionist artists understood themselves to be prophet figures of a cultural revolution, calling out for the self-transformation of individuals in society. Thus, their art would take on a redemptive role for society in the absence of Christianity. The themes of cultural decline, artistic messianism and

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<sup>14</sup> Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, p. 102



the redemptive role of art which are discussed in this chapter are fundamental to conclusions I draw in subsequent chapters about how Meidner saw his role as an artist, his attitude toward modernity and his use of religious symbolism.

The most influential thinker for Expressionist artists and writers was the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). Although largely ignored during his life time, Nietzsche was suddenly widely read and admired at the turn of the twentieth century, indicating the strong inclination towards his ideas at this time. Meidner himself was profoundly affected by the philosopher and spent a good deal of time between 1907 and 1912 reading him.<sup>15</sup> One of the dominant themes spanning the course of Nietzsche's career was his inquiry into what conditions make a culture weak and what conditions make a culture strong. Generally speaking, Nietzsche was negative about the state of contemporary culture. He felt there was too much focus on reason and science, rather than creativity and subjectivity. In his essay 'The Use and Abuse of History' Nietzsche speaks directly to the people in 'present day' Germany about what was wrong with their culture.<sup>16</sup> He argued that the dominance of historical education in German culture – which the nation were so proud of - was in fact a fault, fever and defect of the age. The essay opens with a quote from Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749-1832): 'I hate everything that merely instructs me without increasing or directly quickening my activity'.<sup>17</sup> This quote succinctly describes what Nietzsche found to be degenerate in contemporary culture's use of history. Whilst he valued history, he insisted that it must only be used in the service of life, rather than life being enslaved and degraded by the instruction of history. Nietzsche insisted that life must be led in the 'mercy of the moment'; that man must learn to forget and, thus, feel 'unhistorically' so that he can play in a happy

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<sup>15</sup> Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, p.17; Thomas Grochowiak, *Ludwig Meidner*, Recklinghausen, 1966, p.25

<sup>16</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, (trns. Athony M. Ludovici and Adrian Collins), 'The Use and Abuse of History', in *The Untimely Meditations*, (first published 1876), New York, 2009, pp 96-134

<sup>17</sup> Nietzsche, 'The Use and Abuse of History', p.96

blindness and experience the pleasures and passions of the moment. In this way, man can experience the power of growing specifically out of one's self. Nietzsche felt, however, that all too often in modern culture the weight of the past presses down on man and stops him from being courageous and active. Man's enslavement to their historical education was, therefore, seen by Nietzsche as a degenerate condition of German culture. He argued that a great productive spirit could not exist within a nation that conceived of man through history, rather than through life.

I trust in *youth*, that has brought me on the right road in forcing from me a protest against the modern historical education, and a demand that the man must learn to live, above all, and only use history in the service of life that he has learned to live [...] our first generation must be brought up in this "mighty truth," and must suffer from it too; for it must educate itself through it, even against its own nature, to attain a new nature and manner of life, which shall yet proceed from the old.<sup>18</sup>

In this passage we see how Nietzsche calls on the *youth* of Germany to lead German culture away from its modern historical education and promote a subjective 'people's' culture. The new generation must overcome the old nature and manner of life in order to restore the 'health of a people that has been destroyed by history.'<sup>19</sup> This is one of many examples of how Nietzsche proposed a profound transformation of contemporary culture through the regenerative and liberating powers of Youth.

Nietzsche posited creative activity as humanity's way of affirming life and making it meaningful; whilst our existence in the world is essentially chaotic and meaningless, creativity transmutes chaos into order to make life meaningful. In innumerable examples, Nietzsche demonstrates his belief that art directs the conditions of its culture, for art sets the example after which *life* should be led. In 1872 he argued in *The Birth of Tragedy* that modernity's obsession with reason and science could be completely overthrown by a return to

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid*, pp 130-131

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid*, p.108

the life-affirming art of ancient Greece.<sup>20</sup> In *The Case of Wagner*, he famously attacked his contemporary and former idol, Richard Wagner, for seducing, harming and wearying an already weak German culture with his ‘decadent’ music.<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche believed decadence to be any submission to some kind of transcendence or other worldly beliefs; Christianity being his pivotal example of this. He stated that the culture of decadence found its ‘most sublime’ advocate in Wagner’s art, arguing that the overwhelming, exhausting and hypnotic quality of his music considerably accelerated the tempo of decadence: ‘For that one does not resist him, this is a sign of decadence. The instincts are weakened. What one ought to shun is found attractive [...] The actor Wagner is a tyrant; his pathos topples every taste, every resistance.’<sup>22</sup> Nietzsche believed that good music should make its audience ‘fertile’ so that they are inspired to actively affirm their lives and not submit to nihilistic systems of thought. *The Birth of Tragedy* and *The Case of Wagner* are just two examples of how Nietzsche testifies that art has the power to ultimately affect culture. Whilst his definition of ‘art’ and what artistic activity means changed over time, they remained for Nietzsche the single most influential agency in human culture.

The Expressionists interpreted the significance of Nietzsche’s ideas about cultural transformation and creativity to be the unique role artists had to play in the renewal of German culture. They were passionate about overcoming the values of older generations and repeatedly state this in their literature. The anti-historical arguments in ‘The Use and Abuse of History’ provided important legitimations for the Expressionist’s critiques of traditional academic painting and Germany’s stagnating education system. Furthermore, Nietzsche’s plea in this essay that man should be conceived of through *life* rather than history aptly

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<sup>20</sup> Nietzsche, (trns. Douglas Smith), *The Birth of Tragedy*, (first published 1872), Oxford, 2000

<sup>21</sup> Nietzsche, (trns. Walter Kaufmann), ‘The Case of Wagner’, (first published 1888), in *The Birth of Tragedy and The Case of Wagner*, New York, 1967, pp 153-192

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, §5-§8

communicated the Expressionist's passion for expression rather than fact or substance in their art: 'only life should provide inspiration [...] the artist should subordinate himself to direct experience.'<sup>23</sup> Their ideas about which aspects of life should be prioritised for expression – the spiritual, the primitive, or man's experience of modernity, for example – were extensively explored in Expressionist literature. In general, however, the Expressionists did not examine in any great detail which values of the older generations they sought to overthrow. In the almanac for *Der Blaue Reiter*, for example, Franz Marc stated that 'In this time of the great struggle for a new art we fight like disorganised 'savages' against an old, established power.'<sup>24</sup> Marc uses the words 'old, established power' as a blanket term for anything which preceded this 'new art'. The significance of his statement, however, lies in the combative quality of artists in their search for a transformative artistic language. The importance Nietzsche places on the liberating power of youth was adopted by Expressionists, who championed the transformative power of a new generation. As demonstrated in the chronicle of *Die Brücke*, the Expressionists' concept of a regenerative 'youth' resided in the artistic realm: 'Putting our faith in a new generation of creators and art lovers we call upon all youth to unite. We who possess the future shall create for ourselves a physical and spiritual freedom opposed to the values of the comfortably established older generation.'<sup>25</sup> It is an unashamedly elitist statement about how as young creators they *possessed* a future which would be opposed to the values of Germany's older generation. Expressionist ideas about cultural transformation and artistic superiority had deep roots in their interpretation of Nietzsche's philosophy.

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<sup>23</sup> Kirchner, 'The Chronicle of *Die Brücke*,' (first published 1913), in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p.15

<sup>24</sup> Franz Marc, 'The 'Savages' of Germany', (first published in the almanac *Der Blaue Reiter*, 1912), in Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing ideas*, Malden, 2003 pp 132-136, p.94

<sup>25</sup> Ernst Kirchner, 'Die Brücke Manifesto', (first published 1906), in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p.13

Although Nietzsche had a powerful influence on many German thinkers during this time, not all theorists of cultural decline around the turn of the twentieth century were in agreement with his ideas for the future of German culture. A useful contrast to those thinkers who argued for the overthrow of reason and existing cultural values is Max Nordau (1849-1923). His strong reaction against the artistic principles which drove the Expressionists' creative project serves to clarify our understanding of the Expressionist position. In his publication *Degeneration* of 1892 Nordau identified what he saw as an illness in turn-of-the-century culture.<sup>26</sup> He was vehemently against the momentum gathering around ideas to do with irrationalism which were exemplified by Nietzsche. He was essentially a Darwinian thinker who believed that human progress was ordered in the same way as nature and felt that the denial of this would lead to a defeat in the struggle for existence. It is therefore man's primary duty, he argued, to remain in unison with the ordered reality of existence. Nordau expressed an anxiety towards those radical ideas at the turn of the century which strived for the dawn of a new age:

All these talks about sunrise, the dawn, new land, etc., are only the twaddle of degenerates incapable of thought. The idea that to-morrow morning at half-past seven o'clock a monstrous, unsuspected event will suddenly take place; that on Thursday next a complete revolution will be accomplished in a single blow, that a revelation, a redemption, the advent of a new age, is imminent – this is frequently observed among the insane; it is a mystic delirium.<sup>27</sup>

Nordau condemned the wilful rejection of those moral traditions and boundaries which had developed rationally through the course of history as *degenerate* activity. He felt that a belief in the imminent advent of a new age represented a mental sickness in society; a form of degeneration which was both reflected in and influenced by, he argued, modern art. He

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<sup>26</sup> Max Nordau, (introduced by George L. Mosse), *Degeneration*, (first published 1892), London, 1993

<sup>27</sup> Nordau, 'Degeneration', in Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou (eds), *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents*, Edinburgh, 1998, p.26

exclusively attacked the young generation of progressive artists and writers for their corruption of culture: 'Degenerates are not always criminals, prostitutes, anarchists, and pronounced lunatics; they are often authors and artists [...] who satisfy their unhealthy impulses not with the knife of the assassin or the bomb of the dynamiter, instead with pen and pencil.'<sup>28</sup> The emerging modernism, of which Expressionism was a part, took against the ordered progress Nordau had faith in. His disdain for this new type of art that promoted the rejection of traditional values and beliefs reflects those more conservative attitudes towards art which were popular at the turn of the century.<sup>29</sup> Nordau considered it to be criminally obtrusive to the health of culture for art to encourage the public in schemes toward a radically different future. His passionate attack on the emerging modernism signifies his esteemed weariness of art's ability to markedly affect culture. By 1914, *Degeneration* had fallen into obscurity, but Nordau had achieved great fame for the book around the turn of the twentieth century and had an incredibly high readership in Germany.<sup>30</sup> His work demonstrates that there was a range of ideas around the time of the development of early Expressionism which explored the allegedly degenerate conditions of contemporary German culture and held art responsible for its contribution. That Nordau reacted so strongly against art that proposed a radically different future - labelling it *degenerate* art- demonstrates that Expressionist artistic principles were formulated outside of these more conservative positions on art and culture.

Julius Langbehn (1851-1907) is another important example of German writers who discussed the role of art in a declining German culture because his explicit nationalist agenda

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<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22

<sup>29</sup> Following the unification of Germany, many of the German middle-classes, for example, who were searching for a cultural identity to reflect their new social and political hegemony tended to favour the more institutionally academic and conservative artists, such as Karl von Piloty Franz von Lenbach and Anton von Werner. Such artists complemented their bourgeois aspirations towards the more conservative Germany Bismarck had tried to create, Shearer West, *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair*, Manchester, 1988, pp 15-17; Also, see Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and its Enemies in Imperial Germany*, Harvard, 1989

<sup>30</sup> L. Mosse, 'Introduction', in Nordau, *Degeneration*, pp xii-xxxvi

demonstrates the German-centred character of this popular discourse. His famous publication *Rembrandt as Educator* of 1890 opens: 'It has now really become an open secret that the cultural and spiritual life of the German people currently finds itself in a condition of slowly, though some would even claim rapidly, unfolding decline.'<sup>31</sup> Langbehn believed that German culture was in decline as it was lacking appropriate 'monumentality'. He was a virulently nationalist and racist author who felt that the Germans constituted an 'eminent people' who required a sufficiently exceptional kind of art to reflect this superior spirit. Langbehn argued that the historic figure of Rembrandt represented the essence of the German race which was least defiled by the influence of foreign cultures. He stated that 'the contemporary art market, with its obsessive interest in every style, has already sampled every possible people and epoch, but despite this, or rather precisely because of it, has still failed to discover a style of its own.'<sup>32</sup> This was a situation, he argued, that 'lacerated' modern German culture and failed to discover a style or an artist which could bring the German people back to themselves. Langbehn called for some other great German artist to assume the role Rembrandt and serve as a spiritual guide for the German public; an art which returned to old German values so that the culture of Germany's newly emerged 'Kingdom' could heal from its 'excess of cultivation'. This excess of cultivation was precisely what Langbehn found to be degenerate in Modern German culture. His discussion of German culture being in decline because of a lack of 'monumentality' was essentially an expression of his belief that Germany lacked an inwardly and specifically German culture. Until this had been realised, German culture would continue to decline.

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<sup>31</sup> Julius Langbehn (trns. Nicholas Walker), from 'Rembrandt as Educator,' (first published 1890), in Charles Harrison, Paul Wood and Jason Gaiger (eds), *Art in Theory: 1815-1900*, Oxford, 1998, p.787

<sup>32</sup>*Ibid*, p.788

The anti-intellectual style of 'Rembrandt as Educator' was extremely popular with the public and went through thirty nine editions in just two years and continued to be widely read right up until the rise of National Socialism.<sup>33</sup> His yoking of art to a nationalist agenda was admired by many prominent figures in the German art world, including the reputable art historian and curator Wilhelm von Bode, the progressive architect and architectural theorist Hermann Muthesius and the director of the Royal museums of Berlin, Richard Schöne.<sup>34</sup> Langbehn's ideas were given renewed vigour in 1911 when the German artist and writer, Carl Vinnen, reiterated Langbehn's ideas in his popular book *A Protest by German Artists*.<sup>35</sup> Vinnen argued that international influences were the direct cause of the decline of German art and culture: 'Let it be said again and again, a people is only driven to great heights by artists of its own flesh and blood [...] Even if every true artist, everything great and beautiful of whatever heritage, should enjoy a right to hospitality at the German hearth, a great cultural people, a people possessed of such powerful aspirations as is our own, cannot forever tolerate a foreign presence that claims spiritual authority.'<sup>36</sup> These ideas were echoed by *Die Brücke* artist, Emile Nolde, in the same year:

We young artists instinctively wanted to give back to German art the Germanic character which it had lost 250 years ago [...] I passionately loved the old, *pure* German art for its austere, stubborn, spiritually perfect beauty, for its phantasy which is so deeply rooted in nature and in the ineffable. A truly inward, heartfelt art once existed and still exists in Germanic areas [...] Oh Germany, in passion and in travail, dreamland in music, in poetry, in color. And your youth, they are your best and most beautiful hope for the future.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> *Ibid*, p.787

<sup>34</sup> James J. Sheehan, 'Museums and Modernism, 1880-1914', in *Museums in the German Art World: From the End of the Old Regime to the Rise of Modernism*, Oxford, 2000, p.142

<sup>35</sup> Carl Vinnen, *Ein Protest deutscher Künstler*, Jena, 1911

<sup>36</sup> Carl Vinnen, "'Quousque Tandem'", from *A Protest by German Artists*, (first published 1911), in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, p. 8

<sup>37</sup> Emil Nolde, 'Friends of Art and Collectors', in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, pp 40-41



In the assertion above Nolde demonstrates *Die Brücke*'s tendency towards nationalist rhetoric in his discussion about reviving the old, *pure* Germanic character of German art. Nolde's radical nationalism was an exception among the general ethos of Expressionism. His ideas were, nevertheless, in reasonably good company among his fellow *Die Brücke* artists. In 'The Chronicle of *Die Brücke*' Kirchner claimed that the group was 'uninfluenced by contemporary art movements, cubism, futurism, etc., it fights for a humane culture which is the basis of true art.'<sup>38</sup> The group's 'inwardly unified' position on art reveals their particular manifestation of nationalism. Echoing the ideas of Langbehn and Vinnen about the over-cultivation of the modern German art market, *Die Brücke* refused to acknowledge the presence of international influence thereby giving the impression that they were returning to, and developing, a truly German artistic tradition. Meidner and other Expressionist individuals or groups were not so concerned with a return to traditional German culture. The continued popularity of Langbehn's book, the revival of his ideas by Vinnen and *Die Brücke*'s nationalist rhetoric, however, demonstrate that many of Meidner's direct contemporaries were engaged with ideas about a national art which would lead German culture out of its decline and into a position of international superiority.

Nietzsche, Nordau and Langbehn indicate the existence of a popular literature at the start of the twentieth century which identified a decline in German culture and argued for the role of art in its renewal. Revolutionary, conservative and nationalist thinkers alike were engaged with this discourse, none of whom recognised the activity of a wider society, outside of artistic culture, as having any kind of valuable contribution to make. Politicians, businessmen or the proletariat, for example, were not considered as having an impact on the development of cultural values. One of the defining principles behind the creative initiatives

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<sup>38</sup> Kirchner, 'The Chronicle of *Die Brücke*,' (first published 1913), in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p.17

of Expressionist artists was their faith in art as a vehicle for social and cultural change. They were both influenced by this discourse of cultural decline and the renewing quality of art, and a driving force of it. Their interpretation of the significance of Nietzsche's philosophy to be related to the special role of artists in the development of culture, in particular, demonstrates how the Expressionist's contribution to this discourse amplified the artist's role. Their belief in the artist's leading role within culture reveals their messianic imaginings about themselves as artists. These imaginings were informed largely by their interpretation and use of certain nineteenth-century German aesthetic philosophy which conceived of artists as having somewhat messianic qualities.

Remarkably, the messianic theme in Expressionist art has hardly been explored. Lisa Marie Anderson has researched the messiah complex in German Expressionist theatre, but there is no extended study on this theme in art historical scholarship.<sup>39</sup> Messianic doctrine has its roots in Christianity. The name 'Christ' was a Greek translation of the Hebrew term 'messiah' denoting 'the anointed one.'<sup>40</sup> In Christianity, the salvation of the human soul is dependent on the elevation of an anointed messiah-figure who delivers us from sin. Broadly speaking, messianic imaginings have historically arisen in times of cultural crisis where a collective salvation of some kind is sought after through the intervening activity of a messianic-figure.<sup>41</sup> Christianity was slowly losing its appeal and authority over innumerable people in Germany during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Certain intellectuals and artists became deeply concerned with the creation of meaning in a post-Christian worldview, especially considering that the idea of salvation remained important,

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<sup>39</sup> See Lisa Marie Anderson, *German Expressionism and the Messianism of a Generation*, New York, 2011

<sup>40</sup> Jerry L. Walls (ed.), 'Introduction', in *The Oxford Handbook of Eschatology*, Oxford, 2008, pp 3-23

<sup>41</sup> See Wayne Cristaudo and Wendy Baker (eds), *Messianism, Apocalypse, Redemption: 20<sup>th</sup> -Century German Thought*, Hindmarsh, 2006; Thams Crombez and Katrien Vloeberghs (eds), *On the Outlook: Figures of the Messianic*, Cambridge, 2007; Vivian Liska and others (eds), *Messianism and Politics: Kabbalah, Benjamin, Agamben*, Würzburg, 2008

even if it came in secular form. As the eminent sociologist Georg Simmel argued in 1907:

‘Christianity lost its appeal to and power over innumerable people. The need, however, for a final goal in life has not been lost.’<sup>42</sup>

Expressionist artists were dedicated to the idea of an earthly salvation for humanity provided for by the example and experience of an artist’s creation. Their messianic imaginings of themselves as artists did, however, reconfigure rather than abandon the Christian doctrine of messianism and salvation. Secularisation and re-sacralisation is a constant renegotiation in Expressionist art and their attitude towards religion holds a fundamentally ambiguous position within their artistic principles. Biblical imagery is common in Expressionist art. Meidner’s use of apocalyptic imagery, for example, is rooted in biblical symbolism and there are numerous other instances of biblical subjects in Expressionist art. Emil Nolde’s woodcut, *The Prophet* (1912) (fig.1) has become an archetypal image of the Expressionist’s reassessment of the emotionally subjective quality of messiah-like figures. *Der Blaue Reiter* artists regularly used Christian themed titles for their abstracted compositions. Wassily Kandinsky’s *The Great Resurrection* (fig.2), for example, invites the viewer to consider religious themes whilst looking at his innovative abstracted style of representation. *The Great Resurrection* was part of Kandinsky’s publication of *Klänge* (Sounds), which was a book of thirty-eight prose poems and fifty-six woodcuts.<sup>43</sup> In this book Kandinsky sought a synthesis of the arts in which meaning was created through the interaction of text and image. The religious connotations of the title of this work are, therefore, used by Kandinsky to explore the construction of meaning through their interaction with his increasingly indecipherable imagery. Christian symbolism was, indeed, regularly appropriated to communicate complex ideas about creation, life, death and transformation to a

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<sup>42</sup> Georg Simmel, (trans. Helmut Loiskandl), *Schopenhauer and Nietzsche*, (first published 1907), Massachusetts, 1991, p.5

<sup>43</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, (trns. Elizabeth R. Napier), *Klänge*, (first published 1912), Yale, 1981

wide audience. These were crucial themes in human life which Expressionist artists sought to address following the demise of Christianity. Expressionist artists, however, saw themselves as replacing the presence of a Divine entity during a consideration of these themes.

Expressionist ideas about artistic messianism were largely informed by their interpretation and use of Arthur Schopenhauer and Nietzsche's philosophy, both of whom described aesthetic experience and the process of creativity as a redemptive activity in the absence of Christianity.

Although Schopenhauer (1788-1860) was not very popular during his lifetime, his aesthetic philosophy was suddenly widely read and admired in German avant-garde circles around the turn of the twentieth century. Wagner, Thomas Mann, Kandinsky, Arnold Schönberg, Robert Musil and Nietzsche all claimed Schopenhauer was their spiritual or intellectual ancestor. Nietzsche declared Schopenhauer to be his 'only true educator' and made some 300 direct references and countless allusions to him in his work.<sup>44</sup> Whether directly, or through the mediation of Nietzsche, Schopenhauer's ideas about art penetrated Expressionist thinking. In his magnum opus *The World as Will and Representation* (1818), the third of its four books was devoted entirely to art and aesthetic experience.<sup>45</sup> His accessible style of writing and relatively simple philosophical system that elevated art to a form of salvation was very popular among avant-garde artists. Schopenhauer was metaphysically pessimistic about human life, believing it to be a constant state of meaningless desiring and infinite suffering. Aesthetic experience, however, was his one salvation for mankind from the miserableness of existence. During aesthetic experience, the subject experiences will-less tranquillity and is free from an otherwise infinite state of desiring and

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<sup>44</sup> See Nietzsche, 'Schopenhauer as Educator', in *The Untimely Meditations*, pp 134-172; Christopher Janaway (ed.), 'Appendix 2: Nietzsche's References to Schopenhauer', in *Willing and Nothingness: Schopenhauer as Nietzsche's Educator*, Oxford, 1998, pp 266-277

<sup>45</sup> Arthur Schopenhauer, (trns. E.F.J. Payne), 'Third Book', in *The World as Will and Representation: Volume I*, (first published, 1818), New York, 1969, p.198, pp167-268

suffering; aesthetic experience is thus humanity's only opportunity for peace and deliverance from the human condition.<sup>46</sup> Schopenhauer also sees the experience of art as a great equaliser for mankind, bringing them together in a collective salvation during an aesthetic experience in which 'all difference of individuality disappears so completely that it is all the same whether the perceiving eye belongs to a mighty monarch or to a stricken beggar.'<sup>47</sup>

For Schopenhauer, the exception to this uniform collective aesthetic experience is the artistic genius who has the capacity for a 'higher' type of contemplation than the ordinary man. True art can only exist as a result of the creative activity of this superior type of individual.<sup>48</sup> Very few men are geniuses and it is only ever a condition of philosophers or artists; scientists, for example, do not have the capacity for genius.<sup>49</sup> The sole aim of genius according to Schopenhauer is to communicate his ideas to the public through the work of art and thereby provide the medium through which a redemptive aesthetic experience can be obtained. The idea that man can only be saved from his deeply unsatisfactory present existence through the activity of artistic geniuses resonated with Expressionist artists, who believed in a transformative art in the face of a declining culture.

What is particular about the work of both Schopenhauer and Nietzsche is that they did not use the concept of artistic ingenuity as a given philosophical utility, but concerned themselves with analysing those special qualities which make artists unique. Schopenhauer's account of the artistic genius makes an early contribution to the psychological study of creativity as a difficult and painful process:

The action of genius has always been regarded as an inspiration, as indeed the name itself indicates, as the action of a superhuman [...] It is well known that we seldom find great genius united with preeminent reasonableness; on the contrary, men of

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<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, pp 195-200

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, p.198

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, pp 184-194

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid*, p.185

genius are often subject to violent emotions and irrational passions [...] It is often remarked that genius and madness have a side where they touch each and even pass over into each other.<sup>50</sup>

Here Schopenhauer describes the genius as having a different temperament to the rest of society, liable to violent outbursts that are close to madness. The connection Schopenhauer draws between creativity and madness indicates his belief that these special individuals inevitably face resistance from the rest of society. Owing to their rights as artistic geniuses, however, they have special license to disregard rules. It is their primary duty to surrender themselves to the heightened sensitivity of their nature, despite the social difficulties this might afford. Furthermore, as the work of art is produced in the painful world of willing, the artist must then sacrifice their higher state of contemplation by removing themselves from it in order for the work of art to materialise. Art is thus the action of a superhuman, created at a great personal cost to the artist for the collective benefit of the majority. Schopenhauer's elitist account of the self-sacrificing artistic genius has common qualities with the martyrdom of a Christian prophet. Kandinsky is a notable example of the Expressionist use of Schopenhauerian ideas about artistic genius as a template for the understanding of the artist as a twentieth-century prophet. Indeed, Schopenhauer was one of Kandinsky's greatest intellectual mentors.<sup>51</sup> 'Painting in art is not some vague projection into space but a power, so strong and full of purpose that that it serves the refinement of the soul. It is its language which speaks to the soul. If the artist averts this task, a chasm remains unabridged, and there is no power entitled to take the place of art (this chasm can easily be filled with poisonous pestilence).'<sup>52</sup> This passage from Kandinsky's famous publication of *On the Spiritual in Art*, published in 1911, demonstrates his belief in the artist's duty to make powerful art which

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<sup>50</sup> *Ibid*, pp 188-190

<sup>51</sup> See, for example, John Golding, *Paths to the Absolute*, London, 2000, p.87; Kenneth C. Lindsay and Peter Vergo (eds), *Kandinsky: Complete Writings on Art*, New York, 1994, p.116

<sup>52</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, (trns. Rebay Hiller), *On the Spiritual in Art*, (first published 1911), New York, 1946, p.93

speaks directly to the human soul, lest something more dangerous fill its void. It strongly reflects Schopenhauer's ideas about how the experience of art provides salvation for humanity and that it is thus the artist's duty to acquiesce himself to his higher nature.

Ideas about the tortured artistic genius who suffers for the sake of society were embedded into the artistic culture surrounding Expressionist groups. Autobiographic accounts of the turmoil involved in creating art were not uncommon in Expressionist literature. As Meidner himself wrote:

It was so hard – oh, how hard it seemed to me to get down on canvas what I wanted to say. Still, I sweated, stamped, and slaved the long afternoons away until evening fell, that kindly Friedenau evening that was not kindly at all upon my little cell, but a time to sweat and to groan and to refuse to shake off the burden of toil, even for a few hours. Bathed in sweat, I felt like a heavy-jowled hound careering along in a wild chase to find his master – represented, in my case, by a finished oil painting, replete with apocalyptic doom. I feared those visions, although the finished products gave me a strange, warm feeling of satisfaction, a slightly satanic joy.<sup>53</sup>

Here he dramatically explains the act of creativity as an isolated and painful process. He describes the burden of creative inspiration and the mental and physical sacrifices he makes in order to realise his apocalyptic paintings. Scholars have interpreted these accounts psychobiographically to draw conclusions about Meidner's state of anxiety. I would argue, however, that these accounts serve to position him in Expressionist conceptions of the artistic elite. There is nothing to say that this was not deliberate self-promotion, or the actualisation of long held beliefs about the suffering experienced by great artists. Schopenhauer's discussion about the qualities of the artistic genius described Expressionist artists' ideas about themselves back to themselves. His aesthetic philosophy demonstrates the scope of ideas about artistic messianism being engaged with in Expressionist circles. Schopenhauer's

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<sup>53</sup> Meidner, quoted in Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, p.64

political resignation and denial of genuine human progress were, however, ultimately not as influential as Nietzsche's ideas of cultural transformation.

Of all Nietzsche's writing his philosophical *Bildungsroman*, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* had the strongest influence on Expressionist artists because of the particular themes it deals with.<sup>54</sup> In his previous book, *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche famously declared that 'God is dead. He remains dead. And we have killed him.'<sup>55</sup> Throughout his philosophy, Nietzsche was deeply concerned with overcoming humanity's submission to the life-negating principles of Christianity. He argued that the belief in life in heaven after death, for example, had led to a belief that this life we have on earth is meaningless so long as there is no life after death. Although Nietzsche admits that God had been the source of values which gave meaning to life for a time, the death of God and thus a post-Christian worldview required a total transvaluation of the way we look at the world and understand ourselves within it. In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche posits his character Zarathustra as the new goal for humanity.<sup>56</sup> Zarathustra is an *Übermensch* (Superman) in the form of an artistic-poet. He is a special type of individual who functions above the 'masses'. Unlike the rest of society who behave like 'herd' animals, the *Übermensch* is able to think and act independently of the values of his time. Zarathustra's role in the book strongly resembles that of a prophet in the Bible, except that instead of preaching about God, he teaches the public to affirm the life we have on earth rather than succumb to the nihilism which resulted following the demise of Christianity. He is responsible for the advancement of a new generation who will welcome in the dawn of a new cultural age where man becomes the meaning of the earth and no longer submits to the idea of other worlds.

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<sup>54</sup> See Steven E. Asheim, 'The Not-So-Discrete Nietzscheanism of the Avant-garde', in *The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990*, London, 1992, pp 51-84

<sup>55</sup> Nietzsche, (trns. Walter Kaufman), *The Gay Science*, New York, (first published 1882), 1974, §125, p.181

<sup>56</sup> Nietzsche, (trns. R.J. Hollingdale), *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, (first published 1883), London, 1969



*I teach you the Superman.* Man is something that should be overcome. What have you done to overcome him?

[...] The Superman is the meaning of the earth. Let your will say: the Superman *shall* be the meaning of the earth.

I entreat you, my brothers, *remain true to the earth*, and do not believe those who speak to you of superterrestrial hopes! They are poisoners, whether they know it or not.

They are despisers of life, atrophying and self-poisoned men, of whom the earth is weary: so let them be gone!

[...] I love him who justifies the men of the future and redeems the men of the past: for he wants to perish by the men of the present.<sup>57</sup>

Although Zarathustra declares himself to be a prophet: ‘Behold, I am a prophet of the lightening and a heavy drop from the cloud: but this lightening is called *Superman*’<sup>58</sup>, he is of this earth and not driven into or by other worlds. His prophetic words do not come from God, but through the realisation of his power as a man to create and destroy the values we hold about ourselves and our life on earth. Humanity thus affirms life and experiences his salvation in a post-Christian worldview through the creation of forms – artistry - in an otherwise meaningless and chaotic world. The activity of the prophetic artist figure sets the example for the model after which life should be led.

The Expressionist’s use of biblical symbolism to support a secular project found a model in Nietzsche’s *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. Their belief in a cultural revolution led by a prophetic artistic figure had a lot in common with the story of Zarathustra. Nietzsche’s ideal of the artistic-poet who replaces the Christian prophetic-figure was a well-received concept among the early adherents of Expressionism. It is widely accepted, for example, that *Die Brücke*’s choice of the title ‘the bridge’ refers knowingly to a famous passage from *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* where Nietzsche describes humanity as a bridge, a transition to a higher ideal: ‘Man is a rope, fastened between animal and superman – a rope over an abyss .A

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<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, §3-§4

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid*, §4

dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying still. What is great in a man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved in man is that he is a *going-across* and a *down-going*.<sup>59</sup> *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* is at once a book centred on Nietzsche's ideal of an individual who has realised his full potential and power as a human being, whilst also exploring the idea of a collective social mission which provides a secular redemption. The book therefore reflected the Expressionist's complex of concerns and solutions which reconfigured the Christian doctrine of an individual-based messianism and a collective salvation. That *Zarathustra* is characterised as a truly modern artist flattered and complemented the Expressionists' belief in the superior quality of artists.

The idea that art could overcome a widespread feeling of dissatisfaction with Germany's present culture was radical. This chapter has endeavoured to demonstrate that this radical idea was, however, the firm belief of many of Meidner's intellectual and artistic contemporaries. Theorists of cultural decline recruited artists to transform the state of German culture; such was their understanding of artists as strong and restorative individuals. This widespread belief in the regenerative role of artists was informed by a conviction that the self-enhancement of culture was considered to come exclusively from the artistic and intellectual realm. Meidner and his Expressionist contemporaries were particularly inclined towards the idea that German culture required a total transformation which would bring about the dawn of a new age. Their reception of the aesthetic philosophy of Schopenhauer and Nietzsche demonstrates their belief that artists were messianic figures in a post-Christian worldview. The Expressionists' belief that culture must be transformed and that artistry could lead this transformation was a crucial aspect of how they understood the role of art and their role as

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<sup>59</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, §4

artists within society. Chapter two examines how Meidner used the modern metropolis to explore the ideas about the present state of German culture and Expressionist messianism which have been discussed in this chapter

## CHAPTER TWO

### THE EXPERIENCE OF MODERNITY AND MEIDNER'S CITYSCAPE

Scholars in the past have interpreted Meidner's apocalyptic cityscapes as reflections of Expressionist anxiety over the development of modernity in the city and its contribution to the decline of German culture. Such a cursory interpretation does not consider ways in which Meidner's work is consistent with Expressionist beliefs about artistic messianism. For a more comprehensive examination of Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes we must consider them within their didactic context and the ways in which they reflect Expressionist ideas about artistic cultural leadership. Meidner paid particular attention to the rapid industrialisation of Berlin around the turn of the twentieth century, illustrating how he was directly interested in the city of the present day. Among many German intellectuals and artists cities in general and Berlin in particular became the symbol for modernity in Germany, and all of the cultural values which that supported. This chapter demonstrates how the urban and rural landscape thus came to symbolise competing social, cultural and political aspirations in Expressionist art. Although there were those Expressionist artists who explored certain urban themes, Meidner's cityscapes were not in a communal project with those artists. Unlike other Expressionist city painters at the time, Meidner embraced the metropolis as the 'real homeland' of German citizens. Although his treatment of the city does reveal a certain shared anxiety with his Expressionist contemporaries towards the quality of city life, this does not retract from his position that the city was the new locus of German society. An exploration of

his written material, influences, association with various artistic groups and the apocalyptic landscapes themselves reveals Meidner's enthusiasm for the metropolis as the centre of German culture.

'The time has come at last to start painting our real homeland, the metropolis that we all love so much. Our feverish hands should race across countless canvases, let them be as large as frescoes, sketching the glorious and the fantastic, the monstrous and the dramatic.'<sup>60</sup> This assertion from Meidner's most famous essay 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', demonstrates his enthusiasm for Berlin as artistic subject matter. Between 1911 and 1916 he produced numerous paintings, prints and sketches of the city; a project which sought to monumentalise and explore the 'real homeland' of German citizens. This was not an undertaking which served as a personal tribute to the city he lived in, but one he urged other artists to involve themselves with. Echoing Nietzschean ideas about the role of 'youth' in cultural renewal, Meidner insisted that: 'all the younger painters should get to work immediately and flood our exhibitions with pictures of the metropolis.'<sup>61</sup> He passionately wanted to overwhelm the German public with strong and dynamic representations of the modern city forcing them to embrace the reality of their urban present.

Broadly speaking, Meidner dealt with two urban themes: modern industrial Berlin and the experience of man within this environment. During the time he was painting the city, urban development had accelerated rapidly. Yet despite the construction of spectacular new department stores, grandiose facades to commercial buildings, impressive railway termini and the monumental new Reichstag building, for example, Meidner made no reference to these modern landmarks, nor any of its historical buildings. The Berlin Meidner painted was the newly industrialised city. His overcrowded and claustrophobic compositions do not point to

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<sup>60</sup> Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, p. 102

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104

nameable streets, buildings or institutions; rather, Meidner represents buildings in a fairly systematic way to express the experience of an expanding industrial city. He paints standardised blocks, often referred to by the artist as factories, which are repeated again and again throughout his compositions. The large factory building on the left of the composition in *Burning (Factory) Building* (1912) (fig.3) is typical of how Meidner constructs buildings. It is a simple undecorated block, based on a rectangular cross-section, with rows of evenly spaced, long, undecorated windows. He makes the building dynamic, however, with his expressive painting technique. The slightly concaving front and loose brushwork around the framework of the building, for example, makes the structure look cumbersome and unstable; as though it were falling in on itself. This style of building is repeated in compositions which show larger cityscapes. The middle ground of *Burning City* (1913) (fig.4), for example, is full of buildings constructed in this way. Seen collectively like this the buildings look as though they are built on different planes and without firm roots. Meidner's emphasis on factories rather than spectacular department stores or monumental and historic buildings suggest that he is painting the Berlin of the everyday man; the population's majority and not the Berlin of the wealthy bourgeoisie or the politically powerful. I therefore examine Meidner's attention to the city within the context of Berlin's industrialisation and the general perception of this situation among Meidner's intellectual and artistic contemporaries.

The impact of industrial Berlin on Germany during the time Meidner was painting his cityscapes was considerable. Following Germany's unification in 1871, Berlin became the capital city of the new Empire and Germany experienced the strength of a dominant metropolitan centre for the first time. Berlin developed into the undisputed centre of German communications, transportation, business, learning, and emerging industries. As the city experienced huge expansion and extensive industrialisation, its population went from 826,000

in 1871 to 2.1 million by 1914.<sup>62</sup> The huge increase in job opportunities led to a mass migration of German citizens from outlying villages and settlements into the city. By 1913, six out of ten of Berlin's population were employed in industry, which - compared with four out of ten in Paris, for example - indicates the dominance of Berlin's industrial work force in Germany.<sup>63</sup> Whilst industrialisation was rife across many European countries, the population growth in Berlin and the rate of its industrialisation was extraordinary. Among the cities of the world, only Chicago came close to the rate of expansion of Berlin.

Responses to this expansion were varied. It was often revered as a site of excitement and the place for experiencing newness and the presentness of modern society, which had considerable aesthetic merits. In 1910, Max Weber, for example, analysed the technological and industrial development of the metropolis as having a unique and far-reaching significance on the development of artistic culture: 'I believe that it is quite impossible that certain formal values of modern painting could ever have been realised without the impression, the absolutely distinctive impression made by the modern metropolis, hitherto never offered to human eyes before in the whole of history.'<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Alfred Kerr enthusiastically claimed that in Berlin 'wherever you look you will see progress, development, work, technology, and fresh eyesores [which one day] will count as beauty.'<sup>65</sup> A large number of German intellectuals were, however, critical of the growing influence of a metropolitan centre and its meaning for the future of German culture. The influence of the city's materialist culture, for example, was often perceived to be money-centred and dehumanising. Georg Simmel argued in *The Philosophy of Money* that the modern capitalist economy changed social relationships

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<sup>62</sup> Ian Boyd Whyte and David Frisby (eds), *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940*, London 2012, p.2

<sup>63</sup> Charles Emmerson, *1913: The World Before the Great War*, London, 2013, p.65

<sup>64</sup> Max Weber, 'Diskussion zu W, Sombarts Vortrag über Technik und Kultur', (first published 1910), quoted in David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, Cambridge, 2001, p. 247

<sup>65</sup> Alfred Kerr, 'New and Beautiful! – Bülowstrasse', (first published 1900), in Boyd and Frisby, *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940*, pp 112-114

and increasingly pitted people against each other, leaving individuals feeling isolated and alienated from one another.<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in his essay 'Domesticity' from 1906, Werner Sombart argued that the overcrowded nature of city living was imposing a 'domestic misery' on thousands of Berlin's inhabitants, denying them the space for a genuine home, without which there can be no true family life.<sup>67</sup> Many felt that various degenerate conditions of contemporary German culture were thus singularly intensified in the city and that its contribution to the decline of culture was, therefore, unmatched by any other social factors. As the industrialisation of Berlin grew, the influence of regional traditions and feudal corporations in rural Germany were perceivably reduced. Sombart described the new urban culture as an 'asphalt culture', which was extending everywhere and 'creating a species of human being that leads its life with no genuine affinity with living nature [...] A species with pocket watches, umbrellas, rubber shoes and electric light; an artificial species.'<sup>68</sup> It became popular to conceive of urban and rural culture as polarised experiences which stood for polarised systems of values. Rural environments, for example, were often seen as the site for communal social relationships and an affinity with nature; a traditional and authentic culture which was under threat from the dominance of expanding cities. Meidner's attention to industrial Berlin must, therefore, be considered within this broader debate in German society about the significance and impact of metropolitan development.

The sociologist Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) set the pace for German social theory which defined the conditions of urban experience as essentially different from the conditions of rural life. His publication *Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft*, which first appeared in 1887, had

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<sup>66</sup> Georg Simel, 'The Philosophy of Money', (first published 1900), in David Frisby and Mike Featherstone (eds), *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, 1997, pp 233-243

<sup>67</sup> Werner Sombart, 'Domesticity', (first published 1906), in Boyd and Frisby, *Metropolis Berlin: 1880-1940*, pp 150-152

<sup>68</sup> Sombart, *Die deutsche Volkswirtschaft im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, (first published 1903), quoted in Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, p.246



gained considerable attention by the turn of the century and ran through a further six editions.

<sup>69</sup> Tönnies distinguished between two stages of social development, which are generally translated in terms of the opposition between ‘community’ and ‘society’. He suggested a polarity between ‘natural’ rural living, which cultivated communities, and ‘rationalised’ urban experience, which cultivated society; accelerated to its highest form in the metropolis. ‘The relationship [of human wills] itself, and also the resulting association, is conceived of either as real and organic life – this is the essential characteristic of the ‘Gemeinschaft’ (community); or as imaginary and mechanical structure – this is the concept of ‘Gesellschaft’ (society).’<sup>70</sup> In Tönnies’ system society is a transitory and superficial phenomenon made up of isolated individuals who are generally driven by the ‘rational’ will, such as businessmen and the upper classes. Community, on the other hand, is formed out of creativity and kinship between people who have a sustainable understanding of one another and are generally more driven by the ‘natural’ will. Tönnies categorised artists as a superior type of people who have reached the ‘potentiality’ of the ‘natural’ will: ‘the genius is the artist; he is the perfected form (the “flower”) of the natural (simple, true) human being.’<sup>71</sup> He therefore characterised artists as pivotal members of rural communities, declaring that art serves *first of all* the needs of the community.<sup>72</sup> Furthermore, he considered the creation of art to be analogous with the synthesization of nature as ‘[Artistic] activities express themselves in a genuine work just as the nature and the power of any organism is found to be expressed in some way in all its parts.’<sup>73</sup> In 1903 Sombart similarly argued that natural environments provide artists with the time and stability - in their relationship with nature - to create art out of their *inner core*. The

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<sup>69</sup> Charles P.Loomis and John C.Mckinney, ‘Introduction’, in Ferdinand Tönnies (trns. Charles P.Loomis), *Community and Society*, (first published, 1887), Michigan, 2002, pp 1-31

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, p.33

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, p.155

<sup>72</sup> See *Ibid*, pp 62-64

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid*, p. 144

‘unstable, restless and hurried’ life in the metropolis, on the other hand, made it ‘increasingly difficult to bring to fruition their personal distinctive nature.’<sup>74</sup> Tönnies thus developed an idea which became popular in the early twentieth century; that art was best cultivated by rural living and that artists were, by their very nature, definitively located in the culture of rural life.

*Die Brücke* explored the idea of art making as an organic activity which thrived on the communal values of traditional rural living. Their attention to communal themes in rural landscapes and use of primitivist styles of representation provides an important context for our understanding of Meidner’s cityscapes. Meidner’s disdain for the group chronicles the development of his own artistic position. It is, therefore, worthwhile introducing some of their fundamental artistic principles. *Die Brücke*’s full title, ‘Künstlergemeinschaft Brücke’, translates as ‘the artists’ community bridge’. As suggested in chapter one, ‘the bridge’ refers to the group’s appropriation of Nietzsche’s passage ‘what is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal’. Shearer West has gone on to suggest that *Die Brücke*’s idea of an artistic ‘Gemeinschaft’ deliberately signifies the ideals of Tönnies’ conception of community and rural idylls of family and kinship.<sup>75</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that this was deliberate but in the wake of Tönnies’ pivotal work and the development of these ideas in further sociological studies, it does seem likely that this well-read group understood the connotations of ‘Gemeinschaft’ as an ideal concept. In ‘The Chronicle of *Die Brücke*’, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner describes how the group got to know each other and began working together in Dresden. He stresses the natural and organic development of the group’s ‘communal’ character:

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<sup>74</sup> Sombart, *Die deutsche Volkswirtschaft im neunzehnten Jahrhundert*, (first published 1903), quoted in Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, p.246

<sup>75</sup> West, ‘Rural and urban: seeking the *Heimat*’, in *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair*, pp 33-58

They all worked together in Kirchner's studio. Here they had the opportunity to study the nude, the basis of all visual art, freely and naturally. Based on such drawing, they began to feel that only life should provide inspiration and that the artist should subordinate himself to direct experience. Each man drew and wrote his ideas one next to the other, in a book "Odi profanum,"<sup>76</sup> and in this way their individual qualities were collated. Thus, they developed naturally into a group which came to be called "Brücke". Each stimulated the other.<sup>77</sup>

Kirchner describes how each member of the group worked on their individual crafts side by side as part of a mutually enriching artistic community. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, for example, made lithographs on stone while Erich Heckel carved wooden figures. Similarly, Heckel and Kirchner went to the Moritzburg lakes to study the nude in the open air, while Schmidt-Rottluff worked to complete his colour rhythm.<sup>78</sup> Kirchner gives this sense of community a wider significance through his explanation of the group's relationship with the community of Dresden. The old culture of Dresden and the charm of its landscape provided much stimulus for the group and, in return, *Die Brücke's* exhibitions in Dresden are described as greatly impressing the city's young artists. Significantly, once the majority of the members of *Die Brücke* had moved to Berlin, Kirchner describes how the group preserved its 'intrinsic character' and remained 'inwardly unified' through the strength of its communal values.<sup>79</sup>

An important aspect of their enclosed artistic community was their particular manifestation of nationalist beliefs which were discussed in chapter one. Their refusal to acknowledge any international influence over the group gave the impression that they were developing a truly German artistic tradition. The group were, among other things, opposed to the cosmopolitanism and materialist culture supported by the bourgeoisie and wider urban

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<sup>76</sup> This book has disappeared. The title was taken from Horace's ode *Contentment*, which starts "Odi profanum vulgus" – "I hate the common herd..."

<sup>77</sup> Kirchner, 'The Chronicle of *Die Brücke*,' (first published 1913), in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p.15

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid*, p.16

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, p.17

society in general. *Die Brücke*'s many paintings of rural landscapes eulogised a supposedly lost culture of Germany's traditional rural communities. Ernst Kirchner's *Bathers at Moritzburg* (1909-1926) (fig.5), for example, explored a naturalism which was typical of *Die Brücke* imagery, especially in the years leading up to 1913. Kirchner used the group's trademark primitivist style to promote the apparently simple and unaffected culture of life in natural settings. Heckel's *Bathers in the Reeds* (1909) (fig.6), similarly demonstrates the attempts of *Die Brücke* artists to reconcile man and nature in a harmonious rural landscape which is unaffected by the culture of modernity. These paintings reflect a certain brand of nationalist thinking which rooted the 'German-ness' of German culture in the rural environment. The utopianism of a return to nature was embraced and promoted by *Die Brücke* artists, for a time, as a liberating opportunity from the fast-paced and cosmopolitan development of German cities.

Meidner objected, in particular, to the work of *Die Brücke*. The antithesis to the group's idea of a return to nature was their capital's industrialisation, which Meidner consistently used as subject matter.

Unfortunately, all kinds of atavistic ideas confuse people these days. The stammerings of primitive races have impressed some of our young German painters and nothing seems more important to them than Bushman paintings and Aztec sculpture [...] But let's be honest! Let's admit that we are not negroes or Christians of the early Middle Ages! That we are inhabitants of Berlin in the year 1913, that we sit in cafes and argue, we read a lot and we know quite a bit about art history; and we all have developed out of Impressionism! Why then imitate the mannerisms and points of view of past ages, why proclaim incapacity a virtue?<sup>80</sup>

Meidner considered *Die Brücke*'s reluctance to follow contemporary art movements in favour of the imitation of primitive artistic styles to be incapacity dressed up as virtue. He felt that there was something dishonest in their primitive landscapes, which deliberately avoided the

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<sup>80</sup> Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, p. 104

reality of urban dominance in contemporary German culture. It is, however, interesting to note that Meidner makes no reference to the city paintings of *Die Brücke* artists, despite his critical attention to the group which is evidenced in the passage above from 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis'. By the time Meidner wrote this essay in 1914, Kirchner, in particular, had begun to pay more attention to specifically urban themes. Indeed, he is generally regarded among scholars as the quintessential Expressionist painter of the metropolis. Kirchner produced street scenes as early as 1908. *Street in Dresden* (1908) (fig.7) is an early example of his city paintings. Kirchner's painting *The Street* (1913) (fig.8), however, has come to epitomise the full realisation of his famously brittle and energised approach to life in the metropolis. The soft lines used in *Street, Dresden* do not achieve the strictly urban atmosphere which he would become famous for. Kirchner's distinctly urban sensibility therefore post-dates Meidner's conception and realisation of his Expressionist approach to the city. Meidner's *Burning Factory Buildings* (fig.3), for example, was produced a whole year before *The Street* and is yet more literal in its representation of the cityscape. It may be due to this point - that Kirchner had only very recently developed a distinctly urban sensibility by the time Meidner wrote 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis' - that his city paintings do not receive a mention in the essay.

There is, however, a second possible reason for Meidner having overlooked Kirchner's city paintings. The two artists' approaches to the metropolis were highly distinct from one another. By 1913, Kirchner began to fully embrace Berlin as a place of adventure and excitement. The primitive sexual vitalism which had been explored in his rural landscapes was transferred to a fascination with the erotic in social urban relationships. The most famous of Kirchner's city scenes are his painting of prostitutes which represent the heightened state of excitement, alienation, rebellion and danger he experienced in the social atmosphere of

Berlin. *Street Scene* (1914) (fig.9), for example, shows three dramatically glamorous women at the front of the composition with a queue of men in suits and hats behind them. Kirchner explores erotic tension in this painting by making the male and female forms stand rhythmically together in a composition of interlocking brittle forms. They are, however, not interacting with each other in any meaningful way and the seemingly blank expressions on their faces indicate a sense of alienation. The intense arrangement of colours, jagged strokes and angular forms came to define his representation of the city as a highly energised and somewhat anxious environment. Scholars continue to disagree about whether Kirchner's city scenes are positive or negative expressions of his experience of modernity in the metropolis and, in many ways, this ambivalence comes to define them. What is clear, however, is that Kirchner expresses the view of many early Expressionists; that the metropolis was a site of a rootless modernity in which identity was thrown into doubt. His representation of women is a prime example of this. While the women of his city streets are presented as disquietly self-conscious, the women in his primitive landscapes appear unashamedly naked and unobserved in their rural environments. This demonstrates the stark contrast in Kirchner's understanding of female identity in modernity as opposed to traditional rural living.

Unlike Kirchner, Meidner did not pay attention to particular individual's experience of the city. Kirchner's exploration of a rootless modern identity in his city scenes is entirely absent in Meidner's cityscapes. Rather, he presented largely panoramic views of the cityscape which embrace the metropolis as a whole, rather than in fragmented examples of the individual's experience. This approach reflects his understanding of the city as the 'new homeland' of German citizens. Following the unification of Germany in 1871, many Germans talked and wrote a great deal about the *Heimat* or the 'Homeland'; terms which generally had

positive connotations and related to ideas about the natural habitat of German citizens.<sup>81</sup>

Meidner would not have been ignorant of a widespread tradition of locating the 'homeland' within the rural and regional aspects of German life. His naming of the metropolis as the 'real homeland' demonstrates a shift in German thinking towards a more genuine embrace of the city. Meidner therefore interpreted the significance of the city in an entirely different way to Kirchner and it is perhaps due to this point that he never makes reference to Kirchner's city paintings.

Meidner's embrace of Berlin as a cosmopolitan centre and the site of a truly modern aesthetic is demonstrated by his identification with the Italian Futurist's glorification of urbanisation. In the spring of 1912 he went to the first exhibition of Italian Futurism in Germany, held at Galerie der Sturm in Berlin. His exposure to the Futurist's manifesto and the movement's subject matter was a pivotal event in his artistic development. The Futurists were passionate about the industrial-technological revolution as an instigator of power and used it as subject matter to represent life in the fast-paced and energised metropolis of the future. Meidner was not greatly impressed by the works themselves, referring to them as 'shabby goods'.<sup>82</sup> He did, however, express a strong admiration for the enthusiasm they generated around the vitality of modern cities. As Marinetti declared: 'Come, set fire to the bookshelves of the libraries! . . . Divert the canals to flood the museums! . . . Oh, the joy of seeing the glorious paintings, torn and discoloured, float away on these waters! . . . Use

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<sup>81</sup> In its strictest sense *Heimat* means 'Home' or 'Homeland', but it may also refer to 'native country' and 'natural habitat'. Despite the self-assurance with which many Germans spoke and wrote about the *Heimat* their words indicated that they were searching for a very elusive ideal. The ideals of a literary movement christened *Heimatkunst* ('Homeland Art') in 1897, favoured a rural Germany and the traditions associated with it. There was an equivalent of *Heimatkunst* in the visual arts, which consisted of a number of artists' colonies which spread throughout Germany between the middle of the nineteenth century up until the beginning of World War One, West, 'Rural and urban: seeking the *Heimat*', in *The Visual Arts in Germany 1890-1937: Utopia and Despair*, pp 33-58

<sup>82</sup>Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', in Washton Long, p. 104

pickaxes, hatchets, and sledgehammers! Demolish without pity the venerated cities!’<sup>83</sup> The Futurists mobilised Nietzschean themes of destruction and the overthrow of old conventions and Meidner strongly identified with this brand of Nietzsche’s more radical thought. In common with the Futurists, he placed the radical transformation of culture within the hive of activity which was the modern metropolis. Such was his admiration for the Futurists’ dynamic interpretation of cities, he appropriated certain aspects of their violent and rapid vocabulary to characterise it: ‘A street isn’t made out of tonal values but is a bombardment of whizzing rows of windows, of screeching lights between vehicles of all kinds and a thousand jumping spheres, scraps of human beings, advertising signs, and shapeless colours.’<sup>84</sup> Meidner’s public acknowledgement of his interest in the Futurist manifesto demonstrates that, unlike *Die Brücke*, he was willing to engage with international styles in the development of his own. Meidner’s embrace of Berlin, therefore, seemingly extended to its cosmopolitanism. Many German artists were, however, fundamentally more ambivalent about industrialisation than Marinetti and his fellow Futurists, and Meidner was certainly not engaged in a common project with the Futurists. For example, he did not see the industrial-technological revolution as a means of transforming culture and bringing it into a new age. Marinetti was supremely nationalistic and his enthusiasm for new technology was largely associated with how it could contribute to Italy’s military advancement; as early as 1909, he looked forward to a glorious war as ‘the world’s only hygiene’. Meidner embraced the vitality of the modern city and its supreme influence over cultural development, but its industrial-technological revolution certainly did not signify the realisation of the new age he was looking forward to.

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<sup>83</sup> Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, ‘Futurist Manifesto’, (first published 1909), quoted in Kramer, *Dynamic of Destruction*, p. 1

<sup>84</sup> Meidner, ‘An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis’, in Washton Long, p.102



In 1912 Meidner founded the group *Die Pathetiker*, which consisted of himself and two other artists, Richard Janthur and Jakob Steinhardt. Meidner's work was exhibited that year for the first time in the group's exhibition at Der Sturm gallery.<sup>85</sup> Although *Die Pathetiker* ceased to exhibit together afterwards, Meidner's work continued to embody their unwritten principles. These principles can be explored through their association with the Expressionist literary gathering *Das Neopathetische Cabaret* (The Neopathetic Cabaret), whom *Die Pathetiker* named themselves after as a statement of solidarity. *Das Neopathetische Cabaret* was set up in 1910 by the poets of *Der Neue Club* (The New Club) and held in Berlin as a forum through which they could communicate their work to larger audiences and thereby work towards the regeneration of mankind.<sup>86</sup> Members of *Der Neue Club* and other invited artists would read their work or give talks to the audiences of the cabaret, which grew into the hundreds. The programs of the cabaret reveal that large portions of the evenings were devoted to the work of Nietzsche.<sup>87</sup> They focussed in particular on three intertwining themes within Nietzsche's works: artists, changing values and the power received through reliance on the instincts. Meidner was closely attached to the cabaret, personally, professionally and intellectually. It was his close friend Jakob van Hoddiss who founded *Der Neue Club* and *Das Neopathetische Cabaret* alongside the poet Kurt Hiller. During the summer of 1912 members of the cabaret, van Hoddiss included, attended weekly meetings in Meidner's Berlin Studio. The city poetry of van Hoddiss and George Heym, in particular, helped to inspire Meidner's own city visions. Van Hoddiss' famous poem 'End of the World' which he recited at the cabaret in 1912, for example, combined both Meidner's embrace of the industrial city and themes of apocalypse:

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<sup>85</sup> Eliel, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, p.17

<sup>86</sup> See Seth Taylor, *Left-Wing Nietzscheans: The Politics of German Expressionism 1910-1920*, New York, 1990, pp 38-42

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*

The bourgeois' hat flies off his pointed head  
the air re-echoes with a screaming sound.  
Tillers plunge from roofs and hit the ground,  
and seas are rising round the coasts (you read)

The storm is here, crushed dams no longer hold,  
the savage seas come inland with a hop.  
The greater part of people have a cold.  
Off bridges everywhere the railroads drop.<sup>88</sup>

In this poem van Hoddiss embraces the rhythm of his experience of the material city. The dams, bridges, railroads and tillers who plunge from the roofs and hit the ground set the scene for a fast-paced industrial metropolis.

A crucial link between *Die Pathetiker* and *Das Neopathetische Cabaret* was their mutual investment in Stefan Zweig's concept of the 'Neue Pathos' (new pathos) as it appeared in his article 'Das Neue Pathos' (the new pathos), published in 1913, and in his book on the French poet Émile Verhaeren, published in 1910.<sup>89</sup> Zweig's concept of the 'Neue Pathos' adopted Nietzsche's idea of 'pathos' as a heightened sense and joyful embrace of life's intense mixture of negative and positive sensations. Indeed, Zweig was strongly influenced by Nietzsche and would eventually come to write a study on him as part of the same communication project which prompted him to write his study on Verhaeren.<sup>90</sup> He reconfigured Nietzsche's term, however, to refer specifically to the 'pathos' of modern life, which he considered to be located in the city: 'the great city's rhythm beats in our very sleep; the new rhythm, the rhythm of our life.'<sup>91</sup> The members of *Die Pathetiker* and *Das Neopathetische Cabaret* were inclined towards Zweig's use of Nietzsche's idea of 'pathos' to

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<sup>88</sup> Jakob van Hoddiss, 'The End of the World', in Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, p.157

<sup>89</sup> Stefan Zweig, 'Das Neue Pathos', in *Das Neue Pathos I*, no.1, 1913, p.3 cited in Roters, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, p.90; Zweig, 'The New Pathos', in Zweig, (trns. Jethro Bithell), *Émile Verhaeren*, (first published 1910), London, 2011, pp 129-141

<sup>90</sup> Zweig, (trns. Eden and Cedar Paul), *The Struggle with the Demon: Hölderlin, Kleist, Nietzsche*, (first published 1925), London, 2012

<sup>91</sup> Zweig, *Émile Verhaeren*, p. 118

interpret and embrace the sensations of modern city life. Meidner was one of four editors of a literary and artistic periodical called *Das Neue Pathos*, which included poems and prints by contemporary artists and was privately published in Berlin.<sup>92</sup> His association with this periodical directly links him with Zweig's concept of the 'Neue Pathos'. The first issue, which came out in 1913, used a statement from Zweig to introduce the aims of the periodical:

The primal poem, the poem that was composed long before there was writing or printing, was nothing but a modulated cry, hardly even language, a cry of pleasure or pain, grief or despair, remembrance or invocation, but always in an onrush of feeling [...] It is in our own time that there seem to be signs of an impending return to this original, intimate contact between the poet and the hearer, and that a new pathos is once more emerging.<sup>93</sup>

Zweig claimed that his time showed signs of a return to the primal poem, which initiated an intimate contact between the artist and his audience through an onrush of feeling – the expression of 'pathos'. The intimate contact between artists and their audience was a fundamental principle of both *Die Pathetiker* and *Das Neopathetische Cabaret*. Both groups were set up for the sole purpose of directly communicating with the public, through the exhibition space or the cabaret, respectively.

Zweig felt that the new age was already dawning but that a real transformation of culture had not yet been achieved. He argued that in order for a genuine transformation to occur, the new rhythm of modernity – the 'Neue Pathos' - must be fully embraced. He called on artists to express the 'Neue Pathos' in their work and inspire a widespread transformation of feelings towards modernity through their intimate contact with the public:

He who would quell the crowd must have the rhythm of their own new and restless life in him; he who speaks to the crowd must be inspired by the new pathos. And this new pathos, this 'pathos which most of all accepts the world as it is' (in Nietzsche's

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<sup>92</sup> There were six issues of *Das Neue Pathos* published between 1913 and 1914. Another issue was planned for 1914, but it did not appear until 1920; Roters, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, p.90

<sup>93</sup> Zweig, 'Das Neue Pathos', quoted in Roters, *The Apocalyptic Landscapes of Ludwig Meidner*, p.90

sense), is, above all, zest, is the strength and the will to create ecstasy [...] It must not express a personal grief that seeks to enlist the sympathies of others, no, it must be inspired by a fullness of joy, by the will to create from joy itself passion that cannot be held down. Only great feelings bear the message to the crowd [...] *The new pathos must contain the will, not to set souls in vibration, not to provide a delicate, aesthetic sense of pleasure, but to fire a deed.*<sup>94</sup>

In the above passage Zweig urges that artists must, with a fullness of joy, embrace the ‘Neue Pathos’ and the world as it is. A key part of his plea for artists to embrace the feverish rhythm of the new age is that they use this embrace to create expressions which will *fire a deed*. He comes to define this expression as the ‘pathetic expression’, which is the term that inspired the naming of *Das Neopathtische Cabaret* and, subsequently, *Die Pathetiker*. The ‘pathetic expression’ was ‘pathetic, because it was produced by passion; pathetic, because its intention was to produce passion [...] to whip up, to set running, to snatch his hearer along with him.’<sup>95</sup> Zweig explains that ‘the pathetic poem is not, like the lyric poem, a crystallised impression; it is not at the same time question and answer to itself; it is the expectation of an answer.’<sup>96</sup> Thus, Zweig’s concept of the ‘pathetic expression’ is at once a joyful embrace of the positive and negative sensations of the ‘here and now’ at the same time as being intended to insight passion in others. The artist’s public completes the ‘pathetic expression’ only if they respond with passion. In this way, Zweig calls for a revolutionary kind of art which, with an onrush of feeling, is the beginning of a genuine cultural transformation and the turning point towards the future. Meidner’s commitment to the term ‘pathetic expression’, demonstrated by the title of his exhibiting group, is pivotal to how we analyse Meidner’s imagery as being intended for a broad mobilization of minds. Furthermore, its connection with the ‘Neue Pathos’ as a passionate and authentic embrace of the modern city complemented Meidner’s belief in the

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<sup>94</sup> Zweig, ‘The New Pathos’, in Zweig, *Émile Verhaeren*, p. 134

<sup>95</sup> See *Ibid*, pp 129-138

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid*, p. 140

city as the ‘new homeland’ of Germany. The phrase ‘Neues Pathos’ was, for a time, a rival to the newly coined term *Expressionismus* (Expressionism), but it did not prevail.<sup>97</sup>

Nevertheless, the ideas surrounding the phrase evoke the spirit of Meidner’s apocalyptic landscapes and certain aspects of Expressionism in general.

The idea of endearing the public towards an embrace of the present was a recurrent theme amongst German writers of the early-twentieth century. The beautification of cities was one of the most common ways that people sought to promote a positive approach to the urban environment. Meidner’s rejection of the general structure of these ideas serves to clarify our understanding of his aesthetic vision. In an extremely popular essay ‘The Beauty of the Great City’ from 1908, August Endell argued that since cities necessarily exist, if only for the sake of Germany’s economy, people should learn to derive as much pleasure and strength from them as possible. He accepted that Berlin had become the symbol of a ‘repulsive degeneracy’ in German culture but argued that ‘for anyone who has the eyes to see, the city – for all its ugly buildings, its noise, its manifold shortcomings – is a miracle of beauty and poetry.’<sup>98</sup> Endell urged artists to treat the city like a new aesthetic object which inspired beauty through its interaction with light and weather. This call bore affinities with the ideas put forward by Charles Baudelaire in his essay ‘The Painter and Modern Life’ from 1863.<sup>99</sup> Baudelaire encouraged the artist to be a passive spectator to the fleeting moments of life in the metropolis; a *flâneur* character who strolled along modern city streets at his leisure.

Although Endell’s approach was generally more popular with the urban Impressionists of the Berlin Secession, such as Franz Skarbina and Hans Baluschek, there are examples of

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<sup>97</sup> See Donald E. Gordon, ‘On the Origin of the Word “Expressionism”’, *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes*, 29; 1966, 368-85

<sup>98</sup> August Endell, ‘The Beauty of the Great City’, (first published 1908), in Boyd and Frisby, *Metropolis Berlin*, p. 36

<sup>99</sup> Charles Baudelaire, (trns. P. E. Charvet), ‘The Painter and Modern Life’, in *Selected Writings on Art and Literature*, (first published 1863), London, 1992, pp 390-436

Expressionist art which appeared to support his approach. August Macke from *Der Blaue Reiter* group demonstrated how the Impressionist style promoted by Endell could be reconfigured in Expressionist terms. His representations of city zoos and parks show inhabitants of the city enjoying environments where the urban and the natural harmoniously coexist. In *Zoological Garden I* (1912) (fig.10), for example, an urban exoticism pervades the city as wild animals appear tamed by civilization and man exists among them at leisure. Macke's composition is a harmonious arrangement of overlapping forms and bold colours which recede and then intensify in a unifying play of light and shadow. Although his palette and experimentation with the presentation of form is typically Expressionist, his harmonious representation of these forms and their interaction with light employs more strictly Impressionist methods. Similarly, Macke's paintings of shop windows employ the typically Impressionist approach to man in the modern city as a *flâneur*; a passive spectator of its passing moments. In *Fashion Shop* (1913) (fig.11), for example, elegant urban strollers are seen to be congenially exploring the brightly coloured shop windows in the same way man appeared to be exploring the zoo animals. Macke's treatment of the urban landscape is optimistic and presents a unity between nature and the city. The harmonious approach to the city which was promoted by Endell and demonstrated by Macke was, however, totally at odds with Meidner's aesthetic vision.

Meidner acknowledged that contemporary German art styles had grown out of Impressionism, but stated that 'we cannot solve our problems by using Impressionist techniques. We have to forget all earlier methods and devices and develop a completely new means of expression.'<sup>100</sup> He took issue with how the Impressionists 'saw light everywhere and distributed light over the entire picture', insisting instead that light in the city 'shreds things to

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<sup>100</sup> Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, p. 102

pieces [...] Between high rows of houses a tumult of light and dark blinds us. Simple planes of light rest on walls. Light explodes over a confused jumble of buildings.’<sup>101</sup> Meidner urged that the sharp and discontinuous experience of light in the metropolis should be represented more honestly than it had been before. In his otherwise darkened cityscapes Meidner makes the apocalypse the only source of light in his compositions. In *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1913) (fig.12), for example, three large explosions of red, yellow and green light break out from the city centre. Similarly, in *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1912) (fig.13), three great streams of what look like fiery volcanic eruptions surge into the city. These sudden and bright eruptions of elemental light into the darkened city cast deep shadows on the sides of buildings and angular shades of darkness on the ground. Light is not dispersed evenly but exists in high contrasts of sharp light and then sudden darkness, expressing the vivid quality of one’s experience of light in the metropolis. This is clearly opposed to Impressionist techniques of evenly spreading light across the canvas. In opposition to the aestheticised image of the city, Meidner challenged the viewer to confront their experience of light distribution in the modern metropolis through a passionate expression of his own experience.

Meidner was equally hostile towards what he thought were Impressionist techniques of approaching the city as a passive spectator. His expressive use of light was an experimentation with new styles of representation whilst also being bound up with his perception of the city as an overwhelming experience. Meidner was particularly interested in expressing the conditions of an individual’s sensory experience of urban life. An interest in the effects of the modern metropolis on an individual’s psychic experience was a popular discourse in Germany during the early-twentieth century. Simmel’s sociological studies are perhaps the most famous example of this discourse from around the time Meidner was

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<sup>101</sup> *Ibid*, p. 104

painting Berlin. Simmel expressed a deep concern for the fate of the individual in modern culture, arguing that the human subject was being seriously threatened by its own creations: 'it is often as if the creative movement of the soul were dying from its own product.'<sup>102</sup> In his famous essay from 1903, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life', he explored how the over-stimulation of the metropolitan man's nerves overwhelmed his psychic life:

The rapid crowding of changing images, the sharp discontinuity in the grasp of a single glance, and the unexpectedness of onrushing impressions. These are the psychological conditions which the metropolis creates. With each crossing of the street, with the tempo and multiplicity of economic, occupational and social life, the city sets up a deep contrast with small-town and rural life with reference to the sensory foundations of psychic life.<sup>103</sup>

In a similar vein to Tönnies and Sombart, Simmel analysed the rhythm of urban life as discontinuous and uneven in comparison with the sensory experience of rural life. He located the city as the crucial site for his examination of Germany's crisis of culture and its transforming effects on human experience. The overwhelming experience of the city, he argued, was why preachers of the most extreme individualism, above all Nietzsche, were so 'passionately loved in the metropolis and why they appear to the metropolitan man as the prophets and saviours of his most unsatisfied yearnings.'<sup>104</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that Meidner was directly influenced by Simmel. He was, however, keenly insightful about some of the same qualities of the experience of modernity as identified by the sociologist; indicating the contemporaneity of these ideas:

Let's paint what is close to us, our city world! The wild streets, the elegance of iron suspension bridges, gas tanks that hang in white-cloud mountains, the roaring colors of buses and express locomotives, the rushing telephone wires (aren't they like

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<sup>102</sup> Simmel, 'The Concept and Tragedy of Culture', (first published 1911-1912), in Frisby and Featherstone, *Simmel on Culture: Selected Writings*, p.57

<sup>103</sup> Simmel, 'The Metropolis and Mental Life,' (first published 1903), in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing ideas*, pp 132-136, p.133

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid*, p.136



music?) [...] What triangles, quadrilaterals, polygons, and circles rush out at us in the streets. Straight lines rush out at us on all sides. Many-pointed shapes stab at us. Even people and animals trotting about appear to us as so many geometric constructions.<sup>105</sup>

This suggests a shared vision between Meidner and Simmel. Both writers talk about the vigorous pace and quantity of impressionable images which faced city inhabitants. They are equally concerned with the extreme character of this sensory experience and its ability to overwhelm the individual's sense of himself and others. Meidner's attention to the individual's experience was pivotal to the construction of his imagery in his apocalyptic cityscapes. He represented the overwhelming and alienating experience which both Simmel and Meidner identified as a symptom of the development of modernity. Unlike Kirchner, however, he did this without the fragmentation of his city scenes; Meidner always represents a cityscape, rather than isolated corners of experience.

A well-known example of Meidner's representation of the alienating experience of life in the metropolis is *I and the City* (1913) (fig.14), where he analyses his experience of himself within the modern urban environment. This painting is a large self-portrait at the front of the picture plane, with a backdrop of the city in Meidner's usual style behind him. The portrait shows the artist from the top of the shoulders upwards as he appears seemingly suspended above the city. Meidner creates a vortex out of the city which pulls the portrait down into the current of buildings behind him. He represents himself as frail, with an exaggerated bone structure and deep eye sockets. At the same time, however, his slightly open mouth and wide but vacant eyes give the impression of agitation and overstimulation; the psychological effects of city life. This self-portrait is fairly unusual. It is more typical of Meidner's work that the subjective experience is represented through his treatment of the cityscape as a whole, rather than attention to a specific individual. He uses the city itself as the object through which to

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<sup>105</sup> Meidner, 'An Introduction to Painting the Metropolis', in Washton Long, *German Expressionism*, pp 102-103

express the individual's experience of it. Meidner uses traditional compositional devices to pull the viewer into the scene of disorder. He maintains a fairly conventional sense of perspectival depth in his paintings; this is increasingly absent in the work of his Futurist and *Blaue Reiter* contemporaries, who experimented with flat picture planes. Meidner's buildings, people and elements of the apocalypse still largely conform to traditional methods of linear perspective. Similarly, his panoramic views of the cityscape loosely employ atmospheric perspective, using warmer browns and reds in the foreground and blue tones in the background. He often includes a progression towards a vanishing point which draws the viewer in. In *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1916) (fig.15), for example, the river in the centre of the painting winds through the city and disappears into the horizon. These fairly traditional methods of creating depth draw the viewer into a city centre that is essentially disorientating. The buildings are constructed on different planes and the streets are not arranged in any comprehensible way. Meidner's dynamic use of light, overcrowded and disorientating compositions and the event of apocalypse create a highly sensitive expression of the overwhelming experience of life in the metropolis. This subjective expression destroys the concept of passive spectator in both the artist and the viewer of the art. Thus, Meidner avoids the aesthetising impulses of those who wanted to beautify cities as a means to embrace the dominance of metropolitan culture. Rather, he confronts the viewer with what he perceived to be the reality of the rhythm and experience of modern life in the metropolis.

This chapter has analysed the meaning behind Meidner's use of industrial Berlin as the subject matter of the present. I have shown how many German artists and intellectuals conceived of rural and urban life as polarised experiences which cultivated polarised cultural values. Although the city was often considered to be the centre of Germany's modern degeneracy, Meidner sought to confront it as the 'real homeland' of German citizens,

something which was unique among his Expressionist contemporaries. He recognised its overwhelming dominance in modern culture and was therefore in enthusiastic awe of it as the site of real change. It is a crucial aspect of Meidner's work, however, that his enthusiasm for the city was not an unmitigated acceptance of it. His passion for the city did not extend to a celebration of its development as the realisation of a new and renewed age, nor did he think that a veil of beautification was enough to truly change the way people experienced it. This is demonstrated in his treatment of the city as a feverish, fast-paced, disorderly and overwhelming experience. He chose to destroy the concept of passive spectator by representing his sensitive experience of metropolitan culture on canvas. In this way Meidner sought to passionately engage the public with a 'pathetic expression' which embraced all of the sensations of modern life. This expression sought to challenge his audience with a host of questions about city culture which concerned his intellectual and artistic contemporaries, thus making the city the locus for a critique of modernity and embracing its potential to affect real cultural change. This demonstrates how Meidner's cityscapes reflect the complex of Expressionist concerns and solutions about the decline of German culture and the role of the artist in its renewal.

## CHAPTER THREE

### THE APOCALYPSE AND REVOLUTION

The scope of Expressionist ideas about cultural transformation has a decidedly apocalyptic dimension. Meidner was one of several Expressionist artists who directly used apocalyptic imagery to communicate his complex ideas about judgement, the overthrow of old conventions and the dawn of a new age. Destruction was typically seen among Expressionist artists as a restorative activity and the sign of the dawn of a new age. I explore this theme in the context of Friedrich Nietzsche's ideas about a prophetic-artist figure who must withstand chaos and destruction before he is able to create new meaningful ways to affirm man's life on earth. Expressionist apocalyptic imagery comes in a range of guises which determines the kind of transformative message each artist endeavoured to communicate. I demonstrate how Meidner's treatment of the apocalypse focussed on an earthly terrestrial environment. Although he appropriates traditional biblical symbolism, the message is recast to comment on man's life on earth in the *absence* of Divine intervention. Meidner represents the moment when the apocalypse destroys the city, making destruction a central theme to his apocalyptic painting. Restorative destruction and apocalyptic thinking came to symbolise the radical transformation of culture the early generation of Expressionist artists longed for. I show how Meidner understood the symbolism of his apocalyptic imagery as a statement in support of a radical revolution which would bring about a complete change to the state of German culture.

The apocalypse has come to be broadly understood as an 'end of the world' scenario or a grave interruption of history that causes a complete transformation of life as we know it. Our notions of apocalyptic transformation are rooted in the Revelation of St John the Divine,

the last book in The New Testament, which occupies a central position in Christian eschatology. It is therefore worthwhile briefly introducing the biblical apocalypse to demonstrate how it became a template for the idea of ultimate destruction having redemptive qualities. The Book of Revelation's powerful visions of thunder and lightning, earthquakes, rain storms, wind, fire and overall destruction have determined the imagery of apocalyptic visions above any other apocalyptic literature. Although the majority of the book details God's final intervention in the world – an all-consuming apocalypse which destroys the present and all of the evil it contained – the final two chapters contain descriptions of the world transformed after God's final judgement, through which, humanity experiences its ultimate salvation.

And I saw a new heaven and a new earth: for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away [...] And I heard a great voice out of heaven, saying, Behold, the tabernacle of God is with men, and he will dwell with them, and they shall be his people, and God himself will be with them, and be their God. And God will wipe away all the tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things have passed away. And he that sat upon the throne said, Behold, I make all things new. And he said to me, Write: for these words are true and faithful.<sup>106</sup>

Despite a crucial theme of destruction, therefore, the prevailing message in the prophecy of the Book of Revelation is that the event of apocalypse is ultimately restorative.

In the early years of the twentieth century, literary and artistic visions of apocalyptic destruction appeared frequently in Germany. Much of these visions originated from the adherents of early Expressionism. The artists Franz Marc, Wassily Kandinsky, Meidner and the poets Georg Heym and Jakob van Hoddis, for example, all regularly engaged with apocalyptic themes. They found complementary starting points in the complex of concerns

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<sup>106</sup> St John the Divine (with an introduction by George Davidson), *The Book of Revelation*, (first century AD), London, 2011, 21:1-5

and solutions in apocalyptic thinking. In Asia Minor, where St John lived and worked, for example, there was great conflict between various communities due to their political, philosophical and religious diversity.<sup>107</sup> God's final intervention in the world in the Book of Revelation served to unify these communities, with each other and with God. The event of apocalypse has thus come to signify the unification of divided communities during an ultimate transformation of the earth. The Expressionists' desire to achieve a collective culture for Germany through the birth of a new age, therefore, had a decidedly apocalyptic dimension. The biblical symbolism of the Book of Revelation, however, detracted from their essentially secular project which deemed artists to be the messianic figures at the centre of twentieth-century creation. It was, thus, Nietzsche's reconstruction of the biblical apocalypse which offered the Expressionists a template to liberate traditional apocalyptic thinking from its religious roots.

In certain ways Nietzsche's prophetic novel *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* becomes the twentieth century's Book of Revelation. Nietzsche replaces the figure of St. John the Divine from the ancient text with a wholly modern artistic figure called Zarathustra, who is characterised as a Godless prophet: 'I *am* Zarathustra the Godless!'<sup>108</sup> In the novel's third book, 'On the Virtue that Makes Small', Zarathustra warns humanity of an impending apocalypse: 'You will become smaller and smaller, you small people! You will crumble away, you comfortable people! You will yet perish – Through your many small virtues, through your many small omissions, through your many small submissions!'<sup>109</sup> Nietzsche uses *smallness* as a metaphor for a humanity which has been held back by their submission to

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<sup>107</sup> For more information about the diversity in Asia Minor see Stephen S. Smalley, 'Community', *Thunder and Love*, Milton Keynes, 1994, pp 57-75

<sup>108</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus spoke Zarathustra*, p.191

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid*, p.191-192

Christian values of happiness and safety. The apocalypse will thus see these small people and their small virtues perish and crumble.

Among this people I am my own forerunner, my own cock-row through dark lanes.

But *their* hour is coming! And mine too is coming! Hourly they will become smaller, poorer, more barren – poor weeds! poor soil!

And *soon* they shall stand before me like arid grass, and steppe, and truly! Weary of themselves – and longing for *fire* rather than for water!

O blessed hour of the lightning! O mystery before noon-tide! One day I shall turn them into running fire and heralds with tongues of flame –

one day they shall proclaim with tongues of flame: it is coming, it is near, *the great noontide!*<sup>110</sup>

As demonstrated in the passage above, Nietzsche uses much of the same imagery as it appears in the Book of Revelation: darkness, fire, wind, tongues of flame and the barrenness of the earth are all symbols which he borrows from the bible. The message, however, is recast; the coming of the new age through the event of apocalypse will not represent man's ultimate unity with God, but the absence of God and the life of mediocrity which man's submission to him had created. In the bible 'tongues of flame' signify the gift of boldness, the power of speech and persuasiveness directly from the Holy Spirit to man. Nietzsche appropriates this symbolism and makes Zarathustra the one to gift man with the power of his own speech. He thus turns men into the forerunners of a new generation who announce a message with 'tongues of flame' that a great transformation is coming to earth.

In *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche makes creation and destruction mutually inclusive: 'I tell you: one must have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star.'<sup>111</sup> During the destruction of old values, the *Übermensch* fully realises his power to create meaning for mankind. In this way he affirms life on earth in the absence of any other world or Divinity.

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<sup>110</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>111</sup> Nietzsche, 'Prologue', in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.46

The idea of creation through destruction was foundational to the creative project of the early generation of Expressionist artists. Their belief in a culturally transformative art had much in common with the prophetic message of the artist-poet Zarathustra. Apocalyptic imagery was commonly used to these communicate complex ideas in a way that was comprehensible to the large audiences they sought to reach. Although, like Nietzsche, Expressionist artists often borrowed biblical symbolism in their representations of apocalypse – Meidner being a case in point – the spirit of their apocalypse was rooted in Nietzschean ideas about the promise of a secular culture and the dawn of a new age with man at the centre of the creation of meaning.

Although the idea of apocalypse is most often associated with Meidner, there is an apocalyptic dimension to the work of many early Expressionist artists. The primitive landscapes of *Die Brücke* artists, for example, represent a unified utopian lifestyle following the destruction of the materialist culture they found to be degenerate in the early-twentieth century. Kirchner's *Four Bathers* (1910) (fig.16), for example, shows four naked figures enjoying an unspoiled natural landscape, free from the constraining structures of modernity. Heckel's *The Glass Day* (1913) (fig.17) is a particularly interesting example of a *Die Brücke* landscape which explores apocalyptic themes. Although Heckel uses the typical *Die Brücke* motif of women bathing in a natural landscape, his crystallised representation of that landscape replaces the usual soft decorative lines of the group's primitive landscapes, indicating the fragility of that vision. The year Heckel painted *The Glass Day* witnessed the final break-up of the *Die Brücke* circle. The theme of reflection – on form, style and vision - is explored in this painting through a unified destruction of the landscape. The founders of *Der Blaue Reiter* group, Kandinsky and Marc, also revolted against the development of a strong materialist culture within the context of apocalyptic thinking. They sought to overthrow the degenerate conditions of modernity through the accomplishment of a unifying



spiritual revolution which would see the emergence of a new, more pure, spiritual world. They regularly used apocalyptic symbolism to communicate their notions of a spiritual revolution. Kandinsky's *Horseman of the Apocalypse I* (1911) (fig.18), for example, appropriates the biblical symbolism of the four horsemen in Revelation. The painting shows a blue figure riding a horse in an abstracted spiritual realm and is an archetypal image of *Der Blaue Reiter*'s creative project. The four horsemen in Revelation, broadly speaking, represent death and re-birth. Kandinsky applies this symbolism to his *Horseman of the Apocalypse* to signify man's advancement beyond the objective world towards the birth of a new spiritual realm. The blue rider strides aggressively skyward on a screaming horse in a revolutionary battle to overcome the culture of modernity. Seen in this context, the name of the group can itself be seen as an allusion to biblical apocalypse. Marc also used apocalyptic imagery and developed a unique style of its representation. Although he regularly used the image of horses as a symbol for re-birth, this symbolism was extended to animals in general. He repeatedly places animals within abstracted settings to communicate ideas about a revolutionary spiritual apocalypse. *Fate of the Animals* (1913) (fig.19), for example, shows animals running to escape a world being torn asunder, represented through a crystallised fragmentation of form. This crystallisation treats the destruction of the figurative world in a pure and unified manner. Echoing Nietzschean themes of the need for destruction in the creative process, Marc believed the present to be in a state of ultimate collapse; a land full of the ruins of the past which were holding humanity back from its future: 'Today the long development in art and religion is over, but the vast land is still full of ruins, of old ideas and forms that will not give way, although they belong to the past. The old ideas and creations live on falsely, and we stand helplessly before the Herculean task of banishing them and paving the way for what is new

and already standing by.’<sup>112</sup> Marc believed that an apocalypse that ultimately destroyed the old ideas was necessary in order to give way to the birth of a new world waiting on the horizon. Both Marc and Kandinsky saw themselves as prophets of the new age and understood their artworks to be ‘the signal fires for the pathfinders’. Their representations of apocalypse are therefore the signal fires for the beginning of a spiritual revolution.

Meidner had much in common with the *Blaue Reiter* artists, but his apocalyptic thinking did not share their preoccupations with the spiritual. His apocalyptic scenes do not take place in an abstracted spiritual realm, but the terrestrial environment of the city.

All you painters eager for heaven, you’d like to forget the earth and squeeze the spirit straight out from your tubes – immaculate and utterly transcendent. But stop a moment and study the marvellous reality of things [...] So let’s hold onto the earth with all our might, otherwise we will drift into the blue, into chaos. Let’s return to a passionate naturalism, to a deep, loving respect for the objective reality of the world.<sup>113</sup>

Here Meidner warns against drifting ‘into the blue’, a clear allusion to the spiritualist concerns and art of the *Blaue Reiter* artists. It is likely that his criticism of painters who want to represent the ‘immaculate’ spirit is also a quotation from Nietzsche’s discussion ‘Of Immaculate Perception’ in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. There Nietzsche describes *immaculate* perception as contempt of the earth: ‘but it shall be your curse, you immaculate men, you of pure knowledge, that you will never bring forth, even if you lie broad and pregnant on the horizon!’<sup>114</sup> Nietzsche understood ‘pure’ thinking as hypocritical, engendered by deceivers who have ‘crawled into the mask of god.’ With his desire to confront the reality of the present, Meidner regarded any retreat into universal or spiritual realms as a false reconciliation of the complexities of modern life and metropolitan dominance. Furthermore,

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<sup>112</sup> Marc, ‘Two Pictures’, in Wassily Kandinsky and Marc (eds), *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, (first published 1911), London, 1965, p.65

<sup>113</sup> Meidner, ‘Aschaffenburg Journal’, in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p.184

<sup>114</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p. 146

he was passionate about the objective reality of the world, and although his expressive style distorted his figurative representation, the imagery in his paintings is firmly rooted in the here and now. It is a crucial aspect of Meidner's work, therefore, that his Apocalypse takes place in the metropolis and not some abstract spiritual realm or primitive landscape of the past.

As opposed to the apocalyptic visions of other Expressionist artists and poets, Meidner's apocalyptic visions retain striking similarities to the biblical apocalypse. This may in part be due to his passion for the objective world which readily acquiesced itself to the highly figurative symbolism in the Book of Revelation. It may also, however, and this seems more likely, be representative of Meidner's complicated relationship with his own religious position. Indeed, by 1918 he had renounced his atheism and returned to a religious faith: 'I too was for a long time without comfort, ruined, Godless, a captive of all the errors and moods of the moment, alone and anxious as an alley cat . . . until one night an inner voice comforted me . . . From that moment on [...] the bible which was supposed to be dead and done was a source of endless joy and profound truth.'<sup>115</sup> There is no evidence to suggest that Meidner was any less committed to the secular creative project of his contemporary Expressionist artists. As discussed in chapter one, biblical symbolism was prevalent in Expressionist art in general, despite their claims to a secular art. His employment of both biblical and Nietzschean frameworks of apocalyptic thinking demonstrates the early Expressionist's frequent collapse into re-sacralisation; something which contributes to our understanding of the ambiguous development of their artistic principles. In any case, Meidner's appropriation of biblical symbols from the Book of Revelation provides the viewer with a set of iconographical signifiers to uncover the meaning behind his imagery. They can, nevertheless, be read within the context of a Godless notion of apocalypse.

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<sup>115</sup> Ludwig Meidner, 'Aschaffenburg Journal (August and September 1918)', (first published 1918), in Miesel, *The Voices of German Expressionism*, p. 183

Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes represent the moment of the falling of the city. The falling of the city is a central part of the drama in the Book of Revelation. It occurs in the middle of book's sequence of events and signifies a pivotal moment when the apocalypse destroys man's creations on earth and the disenchantment of their society.<sup>116</sup> Similarly, in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra* Nietzsche posits the destruction of human cities as a symbol for the destruction of man's culture of mediocrity: 'what do these houses mean? Truly, no great soul put them up in his image! Did a silly child perhaps take them out of its toy-box? If only another child would put them back into its box!'<sup>117</sup> In both cases, the destruction of the city represents a critique of man's creations and their way of life in the present. Meidner's appropriates this symbolism and uses the presence of an earthquake to represent the destruction of the very foundations the city is built upon.

Meidner's use of the earthquake is rooted in biblical symbolism. The earthquake in the Book of Revelation is pivotal to our understanding of the apocalypse as a transformative event. In the bible, earthquakes are used as the self-manifestation of God, occurring on earth for the dissolution of a rebellious society and to wake those who are disillusioned from their sleep.<sup>118</sup> The earthquake motif was adopted and made central in the Book of Revelation; indeed, the earthquake described there is presented as the greatest one man had ever seen. The great shaking of the earth unfastens bonds and is the beginning of the birth pains which will see the new age.

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<sup>116</sup> St John the Divine, *The Book of Revelation*, 11:7-18:24

<sup>117</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.187

<sup>118</sup> In Acts 16:26, for example, during the conversion and salvation of the jailer 'there was a great earthquake, so that the foundations of the prison were shaken. And immediately all the doors were opened, and everyone's bonds were unfastened, *English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha*, Oxford, 2009, Acts 16:26; In Psalm 46, it is made clear that although the earthquake is powerful and brings great desolation to earth, it is the exaltation of God on earth and he will bring an end to all wars: 'God is our refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble. Therefore we will not fear, though the earth give way and the mountains fall into the heart of the sea, though its waters roar and foam and the mountains quake with their surging [...] Nations are in uproar, kingdoms fall; he lifts his voice, the earth melts, The LORD Almighty is with us; the God of Jacob is our fortress, *English Standard Version Bible with Apocrypha*, Psalm 46

And I beheld when he had opened the sixth seal, and lo, there was a great earthquake; and the sun became black as sackcloth of hair, and the moon became blood: And the stars of heaven fell to the earth, even as a fig-tree casteth its untimely figs, when it is shaken by a mighty wind. And the heaven departed as a scroll when it is rolled together; and every mountain and isle were moved out of their places.<sup>119</sup>

Although Nietzsche uses the presence of an earthquake in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he mentions it only five times in the entire book; this is compared with the presence of ‘wind’, for example, which receives over sixty mentions. Furthermore, three of these five mentions occur within the same passage: ‘For the earthquake – that blocks many wells and causes much thirst – also brings to light inner powers and secret things. The earthquake reveals new springs. In the earthquakes of ancient peoples new springs break forth.’<sup>120</sup> In both Nietzsche’s text and in the bible, the earthquake is used as a symbol for the shaking of the old earth and the birth of a new one. The earthquake, however, plays a far more dominant role in the Book of Revelation. It is likely, therefore, that the dominance of the earthquake in Meidner’s apocalyptic landscapes reflects the influence of the bible on his apocalyptic visions.

Meidner makes the presence of an earthquake a key compositional device in his apocalyptic paintings, systematically constructing his cityscapes as uneven with buildings rooted on different planes. In *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1912) (fig.11), for example, the ground is broken into a dramatic arrangement of irregular shapes. The buildings are thus thrown out of position and whole streets appear to have been thrown out of place. Compositions with larger areas of space uninterrupted by buildings always show broken ground. In *Burning City* (fig.20) (1913), for example, figures at the front of the picture plane have fallen into a pit of shattered ground. Dark jagged lines break up the middle ground of the composition and a white building on the left hand side appears to be falling downwards as the ground breaks

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<sup>119</sup> St John the Divine, *The Book of Revelation*, 6:12-14

<sup>120</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, p.228

away beneath it. In *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1913) (fig.21), the composition is defined by a great break in the landscape which draws an uneven line across the middle ground of the composition. This line breaks just off-centre into a landslide which drags the remains of the city into the stormy flood on the horizon. The dominant presence of earthquakes in Meidner's compositions presents the city as a disrupted space. Expressionist artists regularly presented disrupted space to convey a sense of the disorientation of modernity or as a formal means of putting into question the language of painterly representation. The crystallised fragmentation of form used by Heckel in *The Glass Day* (fig.17) and Marc in *Fate of the Animals* (fig.19), for example, illustrate this approach. Although Meidner loosely experiments with this presentation of form in *Apocalyptic Landscape (Near the Halensee Railroad Station)* (1913) (fig.22) and *Apocalyptic Landscape (Spree Docks of Berlin)* (1913) (fig.23), it is not typical of his highly figurative approach to the landscape. Meidner's representation of the earthquake can most generally be interpreted literally. His literal representation of an earthquake symbolises the city being transformed through the upheaval of its roots.

Meidner makes death a necessary outcome of the apocalypse but he creates a system of sacrifice in his work through his heroism of the dead. While the living are fully clothed in contemporary dress, running in fear to escape the event of destruction, the dead lie candidly naked in the ruins of the falling city. The figure at the front of *Apocalyptic Landscape* (fig.21), for example, lies nakedly sprawled across the front of the picture plane. Similarly, in *Apocalyptic Vision* (1912) (fig.24), the dead and the dying lie naked together in a heap of rubble. In both *Apocalyptic Vision* (fig.24) and *Apocalyptic Landscape* (fig.21), the central figures lie with their arms behind their heads and their legs crossed out in front of them. Their boldly heroic poses position the bodies in a way that the artist can take full advantage of their human form. They are both idealised figures with athletic bodies, exaggerated muscles and

elegantly restful poises. In their nakedness and heroism the figures become embroiled in biblical notions of those who have been sacrificed and judged. Meidner reminds us, however, that this is not a sacrifice to a deity. The dead remain very much a part of the earth. Meidner paints them using the same earthy tones and natural colours that he uses to paint the earth beneath them. In the Book of Revelation 'Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and is become the habitation of demons, and the hold of every foul bird'.<sup>121</sup> The demonic figures in Meidner's landscapes are not evil spirits at enmity with God; they are members of the bourgeoisie. In *Apocalyptic Landscape* (fig.15), for example, three red-skinned figures in the image of the devil appear menacingly at the front of the picture plane. They are, however, wearing dark suits and the requisite accessory of the bourgeois man; the mercantile black hat of the profit making trader. They are also coloured red, which was the colour many Expressionist artists used to symbolise capitalism. Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes, therefore, hint at biblical notions of judgement and sacrifice, but the battle is not between man and the Divine, but between the social classes of Germany's capital city.

Despite Meidner's appropriation of certain biblical symbols, the important difference between his apocalyptic imagery and the apocalypse in the Book of Revelation is the absence of divine and other-worldly entities. Meidner's compositions give no indication of anything beyond the tumultuous skies intervening on earth. Neither are there horses, angels or trumpets; some of Revelation's key imagery to signify and define God's intervention. Essentially, the message of apocalypse is created by the artist himself. Meidner is the one to deliver a message of thunder and earthquake to wake society from their sleep. Although he appropriates the bible's figurative description of the apocalypse for his apocalyptic visions, his presentation of destruction in the absence of a *Divinity* was essentially a call for radical

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<sup>121</sup> St John the Divine, *The Book of Revelation*, 18:2

revolution. This is where Meidner is at his most Nietzschean. In many respects, the message of apocalypse and the will to revolution were not fully distinguished from one another. His passionate embrace of the city and will to destroy it in an act of secular creation through destruction reflects Nietzschean ideas about the transformation of culture through man's realisation of his own power. The apocalypse for Meidner was a positive destruction which signified the cultural revolution Expressionist artists longed for.

Meidner's apocalyptic painting *Revolution: Battle at the Barricades* (1912) (fig.25) demonstrates how he identified his oeuvre of apocalyptic city paintings within the positive context of revolution. *Revolution* is based on Eugène Delacroix's iconic painting *Liberty Leading the People* (1830) (fig.26), which famously commemorated the French Revolution of 1830. Meidner knew this painting well from his many visits to the Louvre during his time in Paris between the years of 1906 and 1907. The composition of *Revolution* clearly imitates Delacroix's acclaimed composition in *Liberty Leading the People*. Delacroix used a pyramidal structure at the centre of his composition to give balance to an otherwise congested and dramatic scene. The figure of Liberty is represented as both an allegorical goddess-figure who personifies liberty and as a robust woman of the people who leads them forward over the bodies of the fallen. She holds above her head the large flag of the French Revolution and the stride of her long step create the apex and the diagonal side of the pyramid respectively. The middle area is crowded with the many fighters of the revolution, and the base is made up of the dead and the dying. Meidner recreates this composition in *Revolution* but reconstructs the principal figure of Liberty in the image of a Berlin factory worker striding forward over the bodies of the fallen. Meidner strengthens his reference to Delacroix's imagery by colouring *Revolution* with the tricolor colours: red, white and blue; a colour scheme he does not use in other compositions. There is, however, no triumphant heroism in *Revolution*, only chaos



ruling the streets; fire streams out of windows and the streets are overcrowded with the fighters, the injured, the dead and the debris of destruction. Meidner's central factory worker therefore undercuts the victory celebrated by Delacroix's *Liberty* as he remains in the throes of a violent revolution. Where Liberty had held a bayoneted musket down by her side, the factory worker tightly grips his staff with both hands and charges into the space of the viewer with a screaming mouth. Meidner thus borrows Delacroix's iconic imagery to contextualise his apocalyptic landscapes within the theme of revolution.

In the year Meidner painted *Revolution* there was a mass of street demonstrations in Berlin, organised by the Social Democrat Party as part of their dedication to overthrow the regime. During that same year, the reactionary Junker elite held highly visible street celebrations of the Kaiser's birthday. Berlin was thus witnessing a class war and the everyday threat of collision between the elite and the proletariat. It is certainly likely that Meidner would have been in some way inspired to paint *Revolution* by the class war he witnessed on the streets of Berlin that year. Essentially, however, Meidner is not recording an historical event. His reference to the victory celebrated in *Liberty Leading the People* is a more general message about the merits of revolution. Although *Revolution* is his most explicit use of socialist iconography, in other compositions he makes reference to issues which related specifically to the class war in his capital city. Meidner's representation of the bourgeoisie in the image of the devil in *Apocalyptic Landscape* (fig.15), for example, reveals his negative judgement of them and their role in Berlin's industrial society. Similarly, to the right of the composition in *Burning City* (fig.4) there is an abandoned ladder, which indicates a moment of construction disrupted by the event of apocalypse. This is an allusion to the working classes and can be read as a comment on the vulnerability of their position.

Meidner's *Revolution* is a very rare example of an Expressionist painting from the early generation which directly references a political revolution. His adoption of leftist politics and the iconography of a socialist revolution appear in stark contrast with the aesthetically-driven and basically non-political revolution of his contemporary Expressionist painters. The cultural revolution of Meidner's generation was essentially an exercise in aesthetic introspection. The discourses discussed in chapter one, which held the intellectual and artistic realm solely responsible for the renewal of German culture, did not recognise or promote the involvement of Germany's broader society in the development of cultural values. The artist became a prophet, calling for cultural transformation with the expectation of inspiring society's individuals. The redemption they longed for was, however, essentially undefined and their social criticism too vague and unsophisticated to have any real political effect. They had nothing practical to recommend and their artistic principles were based on highly intellectualised and aestheticized positions which simply did not resonate with Germany's broader society. Thus, their mission to inspire and revolutionise German culture was in this respect a failure. As Walter Benjamin would come to comment, 'Expressionism is the mimicry of revolutionary gesture without any revolutionary foundation.'<sup>122</sup>

During the Weimer years after the war Expressionist artists became more radicalised and directly engaged with politics. Artists, who, before the war, were fairly politically non-committed, became more strongly leftist or conservative after 1918. Indeed, by 1918, Meidner had become more vocal and categorical about his commitment to the socialist revolution. In an article titled 'To All Artists, Painters, Poets' written for the artistically progressive magazine *Kunstblatt* (Art Journal), he wrote in favour of artists leading the way towards socialism as Germany's 'new faith':

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<sup>122</sup> Walter Benjamin, 'False Criticism', (written 1930), quoted in David Frisby, *Cityscapes of Modernity*, Cambridge, 2001

‘We artists and poets should be at the forefront of the struggle. There has to be an end to exploiters and exploited. No longer should it be possible for the great majority to live in the most miserable, undignified, and deprived conditions while a tiny minority shovel in their food at overfull tables. We must decide in favour of the socialisation of the means of production so that everybody should have work, leisure, bread, a home and an intimation of higher goals. Socialism should be our new faith.’<sup>123</sup>

In 1918 Meidner joined the self-proclaimed ‘radical’ *Novembergruppe*, which was a large group of Expressionist artists who formed in direct response to the German revolution of November 1918. In their manifesto they claimed that ‘we are standing on the fertile soil of the revolution. Our slogan is: *Freedom, Equality, and Fraternity*.’<sup>124</sup> Although the *Novembergruppe* claimed solidarity with the workers’ struggle, they were fundamentally unsuccessful at communicating with the working class, with whom they were still worlds apart in background, education, aspirations and opportunity. They still had no concrete programme to apply to the cause.

In any case, by this time, Meidner had stopped producing his apocalyptic landscape paintings and, thus, they belong strictly within the ethos of the aesthetic introspection which drove the early generation of Expressionism. In *Revolution* Meidner undercuts the illusion that his scene might be supporting a revolutionary rise of the masses with a small self-portrait which peeks out from amid the chaos at the bottom left of the picture plane. The self-portrait is only from the nose up but it is highly expressive. The artist’s wide open eyes look out knowingly into the viewer’s space, introducing a self-consciousness into the composition. *Revolution* is not the only example of Meidner including a knowing self-portrait in his congested compositions. In *Apocalyptic Landscape* (1913) (fig.27), for example, he occupies the same area of the composition and is seen to be running away from the scene in a

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<sup>123</sup> Meidner, ‘An alle Künstler, Dichter, Musiker’, *Das Kunstblatt*, 3, (first published 1919), quoted in W. L. Guttsman, *Art For the Workers: Ideology and the Visual Arts in Weimer Germany*, Manchester, 1997, p.86

<sup>124</sup> Novembergruppe, ‘Draft Manifesto 1918 and Guidelines 1919,’ in Harrison and Wood, *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing ideas*, pp 265-266

caricatural frenzy, with his hands raised above his head. His wide open and somewhat agitated eyes once again demonstrate this figure as self-conscious. Meidner's inclusion of himself in the picture frame reminds the viewer that he is the one who created the scene; like John the prophet in the Book of Revelation and the artistic-prophet Zarathustra in *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, he communicates the message of apocalypse rather than playing witness to it as an historical event. Meidner's knowing self-portrait serves to disrupt any sense of a collective experience or unified response as he singles himself out as the prophetic seer.

Meidner's representation of an apocalypse in the dominant city of Berlin demonstrates his belief in the messianic role of the artist to lead people towards revolution and thus, the dawn of a new age. The apocalyptic theme in Meidner's landscapes tells us a lot about how Expressionist artists felt about culture and the role of art within it. His apocalyptic landscapes demonstrate the peak of Expressionist ideas about restorative destruction and cultural transformation, albeit within the safe confines of aesthetic introspection. There was, however, nothing in Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes to define the kind of restoration he sought after. He mildly demonstrates a support for the revolting working classes but otherwise shows no sign of what the world might be founded on following its ultimate destruction. The only thing which can be seen to be recommended post-apocalypse is nothingness. The theme of apocalypse explored in Meidner's landscape paintings thus reveals the essentially unresolved nature of Expressionist ambivalence towards an uncertain future. *Revolution: Battle at the Barricades* does, however, demonstrate a turning point in the Expressionist's visual language and their political commitments.

## CONCLUSION

Many of the significant aspects of Ludwig Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes have, thus far, been overlooked. In the past, art historians have been inclined to characterise Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes strictly within the boundaries of cultural pessimism or the harrowing events of World War One. In this way scholars read history backwards and Meidner's work thus becomes overshadowed by the momentous events of the First World War. This approach neglects a critical attention to many of the crucial aspects of Meidner's work. For Meidner, the apocalypse represented a positive destruction which signalled the cultural revolution Expressionist artists longed for. Reading his apocalyptic landscapes in this light reveals how Meidner was engaged in a communal creative project with his contemporary Expressionists. Although his apocalyptic landscapes may appear to be objects of dread and horror, this thesis has demonstrated the ways in which Meidner's visions responded to a discourse which held artists responsible for producing culturally transformative art. Meidner's apocalyptic landscapes demonstrate many of those Expressionist characteristics which art historians have deemed an important subject of study in the continued reorientation of the theory of Modernism. The themes of industrialisation, expansion of metropolitan centres, the experience of modernity, the rejection of religious belief and the inclination towards radical revolution which Meidner deals with in his apocalyptic landscapes are among the factors which helped shape Modernism. There is, therefore, still a great scope of possible areas of focus for future analyses of Meidner.

Meidner's embrace of the city as the 'real homeland' of German citizens contributes to the complex history of the Expressionist's approach to the modern metropolis and the

experience of modernity in general. Future analyses of Meidner might expand on the comparisons this thesis has made between Ernst Ludwig Kirchner and Meidner's differing interpretations of the significance Berlin society had on contemporary German culture. Further research might also examine how Meidner's representation of the industrial cityscape and his allusions to a socialist revolution influenced the emphasis on urban life which came to dominate the output of late Expressionism. Georg Grosz, for example, was one of the young poets and painters who attended regular gatherings in Meidner's Berlin studio.<sup>125</sup> Grosz has become renowned for his caricatural drawings of social criticism which centred on Berlin life in the 1920s. It would be interesting to see how Meidner was thus interpreted by Grosz and his contemporaries and whether Meidner's imagery was made use of in the work of the *Neue Sachlichkeit* (New Objectivity/Sobriety) movement, for example, of which Grosz was a key member. Furthermore, Meidner's commitment to the 'Neue Pathos' - which was, for a time, a rival to the now popularised term 'Expressionismus' - could be further explored within the context of wider examinations on how the concept of the 'Neue Pathos' and its focus on the modern metropolis came to be understood in late Expressionism.

Meidner's apocalyptic imagery was conceived of and produced between the years of 1911 and 1916, when he ceased to produce his apocalyptic landscapes altogether. Although the outbreak of World War One does see an introduction of cannon fire, gun powder and figures dressed in military uniforms into Meidner's sketches and prints, his apocalyptic paintings remain essentially unchanged following the outbreak of the First World War. They are, therefore, an important example of how Expressionist art demonstrates the continuities in German culture from the pre-war years up until the middle period of the war. It is a popular approach in Expressionist literature to separate pre and post-war art into separate groups who

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<sup>125</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long (ed.), *German Expressionism*, p.101

raise a different set of issues. This approach conceives of pre and post-war German culture as two split histories and discourages any attention to the continuities. The idea of cultural destruction and radical revolution was intrinsic to the development of World War One; intellectuals and artists both welcomed the war and played a leading role in the mobilization of ideas relating to restorative destruction, only to become disillusioned with the realities of industrialised mass killing. Further research on Meidner might pay close attention to the year 1916 with a view to understanding why, after two years of war, was this the time that Meidner abandoned the radical revolution he was proposing through his apocalyptic landscapes. Perhaps, for example, this this abandonment was to do with his return to religious faith in 1918.

This thesis has endeavoured to re-examine art history's understanding of Meidner as a pessimistic and anxious character who, perhaps, was anticipating the devastating events of World War One. His apocalyptic landscapes and wider contribution to the Expressionist paradigm in general, offer unique opportunities for research into the reassessment of the boundaries of 'German Expressionism'. This thesis has introduced some of these themes, but our understanding of German Expressionism would benefit from an extended study on Meidner which revises the somewhat cursory interpretations that exist thus far.

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